

# CHINESE ART

A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery

Patricia Bjaaland Welch



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This book examines the meanings behind the hundreds of common motifs and symbols found in all forms of Chinese art, exposing their linguistic, metaphoric or historic origins, common usages, and diverse applications. Plants, flowers, real and imaginary animals and birds, reptiles, fish and amphibians, colors, numbers, and a myriad of inanimate images and personages communicate auspicious and benevolent messages in the Chinese vocabulary of decorative art. Many of the symbols are easily recognizable, and thanks to China's love of the past, reappear almost continuously.

A perfect reference for collectors, museum-goers, docents, students of Chinese art, and anyone else with a serious interest in the culture and history of China, the book includes both Chinese and Pinyin text, over 630 illustrations (including references to on-line collections), an extensive index in both Chinese and English, a bibliography, and a list of recommended museums and other places to visit with interesting collections of Chinese art.

**Front cover:** Drawing of a blue-and-white jar depicting goldfish swimming amongst lotus and pondweed. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

**Back cover:** Detail from a modern Chinese lacquer screen of a red-crowned crane, one of the most frequently depicted birds in Chinese art. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

**Front flap:** Detail of a five-clawed dragon on an imperial robe from the reign of the Emperor Qianlong, 1760–95. Courtesy of the Chris Hall Collection Trust (on loan to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore).



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**Chinese inkstone in the form of a lotus leaf with a tiny frog on the edge (see Fig. [194](#)).**





“Flowery fowl” on a dragon robe (see Fig. [531](#)).



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## A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery

Patricia Bjaaland Welch



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**Painting of a *qilin*, a mythological animal with two horns (see Fig. [319](#)).**



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**Notes on Transliteration** I have included the Chinese names and characters of the objects and designs referred to in this book as language is the basis of much of the rationale behind the designs employed. If you speak or read Chinese, you will find the characters helpful, but knowledge of Chinese characters is not a prerequisite to the appreciation of Chinese art, nor, I hope, to the enjoyment of this book.

Pīnyīn (拼音), the official transliteration system of the People's Republic of China (PRC), has been used throughout with the exception of a few well-known words or names that have achieved universal recognition in the older, foreign transliteration system known as Wade-Giles, and therefore would have seemed curious in Pīnyīn. To retain the integrity of quoted material, I have kept the original Wade-Giles transliterations in direct quotes (even when they were wrong).

Pīnyīn is broadly read as in English, with these exceptions: • “q” is pronounced “ch,” e.g. *qing=ching* • “c” is pronounced “ts” as in “cats,” except that it may also be used as an initial, e.g. *cang=tsang* • “x” is pronounced “sh” as in “she”

With these few exceptions, readers can use a standard English pronunciation of the letter and achieve a fair approximation of the Chinese sound.

A far weightier problem was how to present multiphoneme expressions, for example, deciding whether to separate the phonemes to make the Chinese elements more easily identified by non-Chinese readers, or to combine them in one long expression without spaces or hyphens, which is the more common practice. For the sake of pedagogy, I have settled on the former but occasionally slip into the latter when it felt “right.” I await guidelines from the orthographers of Chinese Pīnyīn for future editions.





Papercut of “100 *fú*” wishing everyone bounteous happiness.



Contemporary scroll of the Tang Dynasty concubine Yáng Guìfēi (see Fig. [465](#)).

# PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My fascination with Chinese art symbolism began when I was a university student and has increased steadily over time. The ingenuity and cleverness of Chinese art symbolism never fails to both amuse and challenge me, while its consistency and sense of tradition and continuity cannot help but be admired. It has been the driving force that has kept me studying Chinese and traveling worldwide to visit yet one more museum, one more exhibition, one more gallery, and one more private collection. This book is the result of all those years of note-taking, conversations, observations, and research, and is clearly a work in progress. I have written it not only because I love this subject, but because I want anyone who ever picks up a Chinese vase or peers at a porcelain plate through museum glass to understand the traditions and beliefs that lie behind the decorations chosen to enhance the artifact. I also feel a responsibility to preserve the meaning of these symbols for future generations – to be, in the words of Dr George Vaillant, a “keeper of the meaning.”

An enormous number of people have influenced and nurtured my love of Chinese art over the years. According to Chinese tradition, one’s first thanks are due one’s parents, and then one’s teachers. I would therefore like to say a very big thank you to my parents for never questioning my love of “things Asian,” even though this has meant living halfway round the world from them.

Special thanks are also due to all those who have taught me, both formally and informally, about Chinese art. Liu Baisha (刘白沙) and Harald Bøckman from the University of Oslo in Norway remain my primary mentors, but I am also indebted to such scholar-friends as Eileen Deeley (韩雪华) in Bangkok and Marjorie Chu (章麥青) in Singapore, as well as my docent colleagues from the National Museum of Bangkok, the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore, the textile societies of Hong Kong and Singapore, the Southeast Asian Ceramics Society of Singapore, and many others who have shared their knowledge of China, its language and culture, with me through informal conversations, study, and published and unpublished works. I am also clearly indebted to all the



pioneer scholars in this field – C. A. S. Williams, Wolfram Eberhard, Teresa Tse Bartholomew, Schuyler Cammann, Edouard Chavannes, Jessica Rawson, and Raymond Li – to name but a few.

I would also like to thank all those whose help and generosity have made this volume possible, beginning with Boston University, where I first began my study of Chinese history and art and eventually spent four years teaching Chinese philosophy and religion to liberal arts and fine arts undergraduates. My colleague Arthur Lederman, and his love of all things Chinese, was a major influence in my life. Thanks are also due all the generous contributors of photographs and illustrations to this volume, especially Chris Hall, Judith Rutherford and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Dr Kenson Kwok of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore, Catherine Kee and her colleagues at Sotheby's, and my many friends at the Tanglin Shopping Centre in Singapore: Mr Ng of the Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Vincent Lim of T'ang Horse, David Mun of Tiepolo Gallery, and Julie Yeo of Antiques of the Orient. Thank you also to Jan van Beers Oriental Art, London, Weisbrod Chinese Art Ltd, New York, and J. J. Lally & Co., NY.

A thank you also goes to Bill Gates, who has taught us all that it is better to get something into the public domain, where it can benefit from the remedial attentions of the world, than holding onto something and trying to perfect it on one's own. Or, as my husband kept counseling me: "Don't let perfection be the enemy of the good." Please send your corrections, alternative theories, and suggestions for improvement to me at [welchasianart@yahoo.com](mailto:welchasianart@yahoo.com). As HE Mr Zhang Yun, Ambassador from the People's Republic of China to Singapore, said to a group of us in the foyer of the city's Asian Civilisations Museum on January 11, 2006, "Let us never stop learning from each other."

子曰：學而時習之，不亦說乎？

The Master [Confucius] said, "Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?"

The number of illustrations needed for this volume was overwhelming. At a time when I despaired of finding many of the required pictures, it was friends and the contributors to such public websites as Flickr ([www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)) who came through, generously allowing me the use of their photographs and/or time. Thank you Sha Ying, Smitthi Siribhadra, Béatrix Daydé-Latham, Elfi Chandra, Francis Ong, Angela Soeteber, Vladimir Belyaev, Clinton Phillips, Chunlei Ma, Eden Politte, Sarah Zhu, Don Cohn, Ken Rutherford, Ron Knapp, and Wing Tai

Property Management, Singapore. Thank you also to my daughter Sonja for her many illustrations, and to the additional docents and friends who read this manuscript during its development, contributing many helpful suggestions and ideas: Marjorie, Baisha, Eileen, Lilee Cuff, Mae Chong, Tan Shook Fong, and my husband Mathew Welch. Thank you also Chor Lin and Peter Schoppert for encouragement and helpful guidance through the byways of museums, publishers, and photography, and Noor Azlina Yunus for nursing the book through the editorial and production stages.

A thank you also to the museums and foundations dedicated to preserving these wonderful treasures so that we may enjoy them, and especially to those who allowed me to reproduce some of the illustrations used in this volume, as noted on the photo credits pages. I would urge institutions to review their policies of charging for the reproduction rights of pieces in their collections; what a richer experience for all of us had I been able to include more of the wonderful classic pieces of Chinese art that should be known to more, but the prices were often prohibitive in a volume requiring so many illustrations and photographs. A very special thank you to those institutions who waived or greatly reduced their fees to assist with this volume. I have chosen those photographs I felt added the most value to the volume and urge readers to visit the museums that house the other items mentioned, but unfortunately not illustrated. Most of the museums have excellent websites and readers are encouraged to visit them. Sotheby's items referred to, for example, can be found on the Sotheby's website using the sales date and location in the search engine. A list of museums with interesting Chinese collections and their addresses is included at the end of this volume with the hope that readers will visit them either in person or virtually. As always, the Chinese have the perfect expression: *bǎi wén bùrú yī jiàn* (百闻不如一见) "one seeing is better than a hundred hearings."



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# INTRODUCTION

All the designs that appear on Chinese textiles, paintings, sculptures, ceramics, jewelry, furniture, snuff bottles, and the myriad of other aesthetic and folk arts that dominate Chinese culture, have a meaning. Most of these meanings are easily understood, just as they are in the West, consisting of flowers, plants, geometric patterns, landscapes, and other eye-pleasing arrangements. They are decorative devices chosen for their attractiveness or beauty in the eyes of the artist. Artists also employ scenes and symbols from a culture's past that can be either religious, such as depictions of the stars or the moon, or profane, such as scenes from a famous play or folk tale. Such artistic inspiration is common to most cultures.

Chinese art, however, especially from the Ming Dynasty (CE 1368–1644) onwards, employs additional forms of artistic devices – decorative motifs that communicated and still communicate very specific messages in the eyes of the artisan and the eventual owner. Chinese art contains a whole code of these symbols. Some are based on the similarities of an object's attributes to another object (a metaphor), while others are a play on a word's pronunciation (a pun or rebus). All, however, constitute a visual language or means of expressing a thought or sentiment, where the design – that is, the meaning the artist is trying to convey – takes precedence over the item it is decorating. One expert goes so far as to call these communication shortcuts in Chinese art “a conceptual art purely based on symbolism.”<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, these symbolic meanings have changed very little over time. There is a reverence for the past in Chinese culture that treasures and idealizes continuity (or stability) over change. Mao's long uphill battle radicalizing the nation to force its emergence into the twentieth century was designed to overcome this resistance to change. Mao also tried to radicalize art (and we have a whole generation of inspirational posters idealizing communes and workers as its heritage), but once things quieted down, Chinese potters and carvers returned to portraying peonies, butterflies, shrimp, peaches, bats, cranes, and all the other favorite symbols of their decorative repertoires. Even the great Chinese artist Qí Báishí (齐白石, 1864–1957), characterized as “a unique figure in the annals of



contemporary Chinese art,” used as his subject matter the traditional motifs of shrimp and fish, squirrels with grapes, flowers, lychees, frogs, crabs, grasshoppers, and insects – all redolent with meanings beyond their simple depictions.

But how did some of these symbols evolve? To understand this, we need to delve for a moment into how the Chinese language is constructed.

Chinese is a wondrously fascinating language consisting of only a few hundred phonemes<sup>3</sup> or sounds. The limited number of sounds possible in Chinese – for example, the only consonants that are allowed as word endings in China’s official language, Pǔtōnghuà (普通话,<sup>4</sup> are *n* and *ng* – has given credence to the belief that Chinese is a very limited language. This is not so, as it is the various tones that one applies to the basic 400 phonemes, and the various combinations these 400 phonemes can make when grouped in two or, less seldom, three phonemes that form the richness of the language.

Every new student of Chinese quickly learns that the application of a different inflection (or tone) to each of the basic 400 phonemes results in an entirely different meaning. For example, the phoneme transliterated as *shu* has a number of meanings, each expressed by a different written character. When pronounced with a level (first) tone in standard Chinese (*shū*), it means “book” (*shū* 书), but when pronounced with a rising (second) tone (*shú*), the phoneme takes on other meanings, including “ripe” (*shú* 熟) and “ransom” (*shú* 赎). Pronounced with a dipping (third) tone (*shǔ*), it can mean “mouse” (*shǔ* 鼠) or “hot weather” (*shǔ* 暑), and with a falling (fourth) tone (*shù*), “tree” (*shù* 树). Nor are there only one or two meanings for each phoneme with its specific tone. In Pǔ tōnghuà, there are, for example, roughly fourteen different characters (and hence meanings) for the sound *shū* in the first tone, five with the rising tone, nine with the dipping tone, and twelve with the falling tone. Tone and context are thus the distinguishing lexical reference points in Chinese speech. Luckily, most words have a specific, individual written character to distinguish them in written Chinese, so while the number of basic phonemes may be limited orally, there are tens of thousands of distinctive written characters.

These characters are constructed from several different elements: one element in a character sometimes gives a hint of the meaning from a pictorial root, another some indication of the most likely pronunciation. The meanings of some characters are quite readily understood once the “picture” components that

construct them are understood, even if the character has never been encountered before. An oft-used example is the word for “good” (*hǎo* 好), consisting of a combination of the stylized representation for “woman” (女) with the stylized representation for “child” (子). The word for “month” (*yuè* 月) is the simple stylized drawing of a moon. The word for “old, ancient” (*gǔ* 古) is a combination of the character for “ten” (*shí* 十) and the character for “mouth” (*kǒu* 口), in other words, something dating back ten generations.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the composition of such words is more the exception than the rule and Chinese has rightfully earned its reputation as a difficult language to learn to read and write.

Given that the same sound can have a variety of meanings, the possibility for words or sentences (or works of art) bearing double meanings is almost limitless. For example, because both *fú* meaning “bat” (蝠) and the sentiment *fú* meaning “good wishes” (福) share the same phoneme *fú*, a depiction of a bat has come to represent good luck. The phoneme *lù* can mean either “deer” (鹿) or “an official’s salary,” which came to be understood as “riches” (禄). Hence, a picture of a deer represents achieving office and its resultant financial benefits. If English operated on the same system as Chinese, a corny British English example might be a picture of two swimming pools to symbolize winning a lot of money (“pools” also meaning “a lottery” in British English). Add a picture of a scale to the rebus and the meaning would be “coming your way [weigh],” which is the same message achieved by the Chinese when they add a magpie to a picture. Have a horse tethered nearby (in your Chinese equivalent), and you add the further meaning of “may it be soon.”



Fig. 1 It is not by accident that the children shown in this colorful folk painting are holding toy animals depicting a cock, ram, fish, and pig. All have a symbolic meaning that makes them especially appropriate symbols at the Chinese Lunar New Year. The character on the red lantern is *fú* (“happiness”) while the one in the middle is *chún* (“spring”).

Chinese dialects yield a number of Chinese puns that have created a wealth of verbal jokes, but only auspicious symbols became visual metaphors (Fig. 2). All of the pictorial puns and symbols found in Chinese art are positive or auspicious or ward against danger. One Chinese text asserts that such auspicious designs were used to provide “comfort at heart” in a dangerous world.<sup>6</sup> We know from the Chinese love of auspicious symbols that there was a great belief in “the superstition that pictures could function like charms. In a way parallel to auspicious pictures encouraging wealth and happiness, a picture of destruction [or other undesirable states] may have been felt to promote the image as reality.”<sup>7</sup> Just as the West has “comfort food,” China had “comfort art.”

Whatever the reason, there are a great number of verbal euphemisms and wordplays that have no counterpart whatsoever in art. There are no paintings of honey mixed with oil, a verbal and literary illusion to false friendships. Nor are there any paintings of “hunting hares,” a polite way in classical Chinese literature

of referring to the practice of going to a male brothel in search of a young man. Nor a painting of a pair of chopsticks to signify a speedy pregnancy, although we know they were once fastened above the door to a bride's room for just such a purpose.<sup>8</sup>

It is also important to note that the objects in a design or subjects in a painting need to be thematically consistent. Sometimes, for example, a painting of a deer is just a painting of a deer, nothing more. But when a deer appears with a crane and a pine tree, the meaning is unquestionable (longevity), and when a seated deer is depicted next to an eight-spoked wheel, it is to remind us of the Buddha's first sermon, held in a deer park. So in examining a Chinese design, one has to decide whether the different elements form a coherent symbol set or not. Are they inextricably linked, all conveying linked or related messages? Once you are bitten by the Chinese symbolism bug, it is easy to suspect meanings in everything, so exercise a critical eye as well as a sharp mind. Not all Chinese visual subjects have meanings beyond the obvious one, but a surprising number do.

Many of the motifs and designs employed in Chinese art also have their origins in the three major religious or philosophical schools that shaped traditional China: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Tibet additionally contributed some Lamaist Buddhist symbols that became very common in southwest China where they are still found today.<sup>9</sup> A rudimentary knowledge of these faiths helps the art historian understand the religious symbols found in Chinese art. Daoism, with its love of floral and natural motifs, and Buddhism, with its many symbols representing tenets of the faith, were especially influential forces.

Luckily for the beginning connoisseur of Chinese art, many of the symbols used in Chinese art are fairly straightforward once a few rudimentary generalities and homophones have been learned. And thanks to China's love of the past, these same symbols and motifs have been idealized and repeated throughout China's history (Fig. 1). You must remember that a bat symbolizes good luck and peaches longevity. Over time, you will learn some of the more subtle symbols. Young Chinese brides, for example, once stepped onto wooden saddles in the hope of bringing peace and tranquility into their marriage – the sound for “saddle” (*ān* 鞍) being identical to that for “peace” (*ān* 安) – so Chinese paintings do occasionally appear with a saddle in the courtyard of a scene showing a household receiving a new bride. Although most likely not the primary focus of



the picture, knowledge of this curiosity adds understanding to the viewer.<sup>10</sup> We can be fairly confident in most of our understanding of pictorial puns and symbols because we have inscriptions or poems connected with the works of art that help us interpret them correctly.<sup>11</sup> Some interpretations we may never be sure of although we can make educated guesses, but is this not the fun of research and learning?

During the Song Dynasty (CE 960–1279), the Emperor Huīzōng (徽宗), who reigned from 1101 to 1126, catalogued his collection of paintings into ten categories:<sup>12</sup> (1) Daoist and Buddhist scenes; (2) Illustrations of manners, morals, and legends; (3) Palaces and houses; (4) Foreign tribes; (5) Dragons and fish; (6) Mountains and water; (7) Domestic animals and wild beasts; (8) Flowers and birds; (9) Ink bamboos, and (10) Vegetables and fruit. We have taken our lead from him, but have further simplified this book into four major groupings: (1) Symbols from Nature: plants, minerals, insects, birds, and animals; (2) Divine and mortal beings; (3) Religious (Daoist and Buddhist) imagery, and (4) Inanimate Objects.

Readers will find some of the symbols familiar. “The Chinese are much addicted to the doctrine of signatures,”<sup>13</sup> writes one author, which creates relationships on visual physical grounds (such as equating the seed-laden pomegranate with fertility). Many of the most common symbolisms are also so deeply embedded in the Chinese culture that they are “givens.” It would never occur to a Chinese, for example, to wonder why a bat decorates one porcelain plate while on another a rabbit contemplates the moon. They are part of a shared decorative vocabulary.

Other decorative themes may require a fair degree of detective work, regardless of where one has been culturally schooled. There is, for example, “a picture by Li Yüeh or Yün Ko consisting of a sprig of a flowering tree (prunus), a twig of pine, a cluster of narcissi, an ancient stone, a jar of melon seeds, two walnuts and two squirrels ... [that is] a rebus reading ‘May you have three kinds of abundance (good fortune, years and male offspring) in combination with peace and harmony’.”<sup>14</sup> This is by no means an exceptional combination. Other clues found within paintings will help you pinpoint the season or time of day a painting reflects.<sup>15</sup>

At times, too, art is a metaphor for sentiments or emotions deeply rooted in a nation’s history, such as occurred during the Yuan Dynasty (CE 1280–1367)

when China was under foreign (Mongol) rule, and artists expressed political and emotional sentiments through their choice of subjects. Such an example is the famous painting of the “rootless orchid” by the Song Dynasty loyalist Zhèng Sīxiāo (郑思肖, 1241–1318) today hanging in the Osaka Municipal Museum, which attempted to convey how “the ground had been taken away by foreign people.”<sup>16</sup>

Scenes from such popular novels as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The West Chamber*, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, and *Journey to the West* have also long been popular with Chinese artists. A Western reader encountering a painting of a little girl wearing a red cape standing in a forest with a wolf would know immediately that it is drawn from the fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood*. In the same way, sophisticated Chinese viewers of Chinese art know, in an instant, the historical or literary reference a painting represents.<sup>17</sup> The treasury of Chinese history and literature is simply too abundant to include such historical and literary references, but we can promise that a whole further world of interpreting Chinese art awaits those who read the classics of Chinese history and literature. In the meantime, it is hoped that readers will forgive the author for “recording one [item while] omitting 10,000” (*guà yī lòu wàn* 挂一漏万).

A final word: it has often been written that the Chinese abhor undecorated space. While obviously overstated, the modern-day relevance of this observation was brought home to me in the mid-1980s when a friend who managed a small boutique in Norway received a shipment of “elegant, plain black silk brocade purses” she had ordered from a sample she had been shown in China. To her horror, the purses in the new shipment were covered in heavy and, to a Western eye, overdone beadwork. When she finally reached the factory director by phone, the explanation was straightforward in its Chinese simplicity: “So plain. We improved at no extra cost to you.” The Chinese call it “adding flowers to the brocade” (*jǐn shàng tiān huā* 锦上添花) and justify it as “making a good thing better.”<sup>18</sup>

This Chinese love of decorated space means that sometimes a decoration is merely a decoration to fill empty space. Generally, however, a design or scene has been chosen to send a special message along with the object itself, and it is not necessarily on one level alone. Look beyond the central design or motif into the background, the surroundings, the borders. Beyond the design embroidered on the fabric<sup>19</sup> or printed on the page more designs may well be embedded in the

very fabric of the piece. The vase a design covers may itself be an integral element in the pun, as you shall soon see. Chinese art and symbolism is multilayered. But once learned, the visual vocabulary of Chinese symbols will be with you always. May its richness long delight and reward you.



Fig. 2 **The Chinese love of auspicious symbols has generated a wealth of visual, physical, and emotional puns.**

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Yang Xianrang and Yang Yang, *Chinese Folk Art*, Beijing: New World Press, 2000, p. [38](#).

<sup>2</sup> Mok, Pauline (ed.), *Qi Baishi from the Collection of China National Art Gallery*, exhibition catalogue, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Festival Society and Hong Kong Arts Center, 1988, Preface.

<sup>3</sup> A morpheme is “the smallest intelligible unit of speech.”

<sup>4</sup> Standard Chinese, as opposed to such dialects as Hokkien or Cantonese. Pǔtōnghuà is the official language of the PRC. It means, literally, “the common language.”

<sup>5</sup> Using pictures to convey meanings is as old as civilization, but before readers begin to think written Chinese is simple, be assured that logical compositions such as the examples given here are far more the exception than the rule. The vast majority of characters or “words” are not decipherable through their component pictograms.

<sup>6</sup> Ye Yingsui, Ye Shuqin, and Ye Duyi, *Auspicious Designs of China*, Beijing: China Travel & Tourism Press, 2002, p. [2](#). Furthermore, “They express aspirations of the people and embody an artistic conception and a taste of the true, the good and the beautiful in life.... They help people find spiritual sustenance, draw enlightenment, and obtain a sublimation of vitality” (p. [5](#)).

<sup>7</sup> Alfreda Murck, “Responses to the Manchu Conquest: Wu Hong and Kong Shangren,” *Orientations*, Vol. 36, No. 8, 2005, p. [57](#).

<sup>8</sup> Majorie Rankin Steurt relates in *Broken Bits of Old China: Glimpses of China 1912–1923* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1973) seeing chopsticks above the door to a new bride’s room. When she asked “But

why chopsticks fastened over the door?” her Chinese friend leaned over and whispered in English, “Quick son. *Kwei dze* [kuàizi]. They always fasten chopsticks over the bride’s door.”

- 9 Lamaist Buddhism, which had been a strong influence on the Mongols in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, continued some contact with Han China even after the decline of the Mongols’ power. The Qing Emperor Yǒngzhèng (雍正, r. 1723–35) converted the palace where he had been born into a Lama temple, and his son, the Emperor Qiánlóng (乾隆, r. 1736–95), had a replica of the Tibetan Potala from Lhasa built at Jehol, the court’s summer resort. The last empress of China, the infamous Empress Cíxǐ 慈禧太后 1834–1908), was also a well-known patroness.
- 10 In a similar vein, miniature brass or copper saddles used to be worn as belt toggles and charms. A brass saddle (*āntóng* 鞍铜) is a pun on both words: *ān* (“saddle” and “peace”) and *tóng* (“brass” and “together”) translating into a matrimonial wish for “peace together” (*tóngān* 同安).
- 11 For an excellent article on this topic with examples, see Ni Yibin, “The Anatomy of Rebus in Chinese Decorative Arts,” *Oriental Art*, Vol. 49, No. 3, [2004], pp. [12–23](#).
- 12 Soame Jenyns, *A Background to Chinese Painting*, New York: Schocken Books, 1966, p. [105](#) ff.
- 13 John D. Keys, *Chinese Herbs: Their Botany, Chemistry, and Pharmacodynamics*, Hong Kong: Swindon Book Company, 1976, p. [13](#).
- 14 Jenyns, *A Background to Chinese Painting*, p. [163](#).
- 15 There is a famous anonymous fourteenth-century (?) story, “The Cat and the Peony,” from *The Scholar Waves the Yak’s Tail* that illustrates this point: “Ou-Yang Hsiu (q.v.) picked up an old picture of a cluster of peonies with a cat sitting near by. He was quite at a loss to make out its inner meaning, until a friend who lived next door came in to see it. ‘Oh,’ exclaimed the latter, ‘the subject is Noon;’ and he proceeded to explain as follows. ‘You notice,’ said he, ‘that the flowers are wide open and dulled in hue, just as flowers are at midday. Then again, the pupils of the cat’s eyes are like a black thread, as they always are at that hour. When flowers have dew on them the calyx is contracted and the hue is fresh; and in the morning and evening the pupils in a cat’s eyes are always round. Thus skillfully, is it possible to ferret out the underlying intentions of the men of old.’” See Herbert A. Giles (ed.), *Gems of Chinese Literature*, New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1965, p. [212](#).
- 16 Wang Yao-t’ing (trans. Stone Studio), *Looking at Chinese Painting: A Comprehensive Guide to the Philosophy, Technique and History of Chinese Painting*, Tokyo: Nigensha Publishing, 1966, pp. [168–9](#). The orchid is depicted as an isolated object. When viewers asked the artist, “Where is the ground?” he answered that the barbarians had stolen it. The name Sīxiāo means “thinking of/longing for the Song Emperor.”
- 17 There is an extensive study by Professor Ni Yibin of the popularity of scenes in seventeenth-century China from *The West Chamber* (*Xīxiāngjì* 西厢记, also known as *Romance of the Western Chamber*), a Chinese novel written by Wáng Shífǔ (王实甫) in the thirteenth century. See “The Shunzhi Emperor and the Popularity of Scenes from the Romance of the Western Wing on Porcelain,” in Michael Butler et al., *Treasures from an Unknown Reign: Shunzhi Porcelain (1644–1661)*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002, pp. [68–81](#). Ni’s conclusion is that more scenes have been attributed to this novel than are warranted, including the famous vase in the Victoria & Albert Museum. “We can conclude that the images on this vase are definitely not from the *Romance of the Western Wing*.”
- 18 Li Zuding (chief ed.), *Chinese Traditional Auspicious Patterns*, PRC: Shanghai Popular Science Press,

1989, p. [148](#). This expression has an older (Confucian) meaning, however, as it was the original expression used in Imperial China when a son or grandson of a past graduate of the provincial examinations were able to celebrate the former's successful passing of the examination together. See also Ichisada Miyazaki, (trans. Conrad Schirokauer), *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1976, p. [56](#). It is an excellent example of how an old symbol or expression has retained its significance while taking on a more appropriate, modern meaning.

- [19](#) "Embroidered garments [became] fashionable for women from the end of the seventeenth century [with a] changeover from woven to embroidered designs." See Verity Wilson, *Chinese Dress*, London: Oxford University Press in association with Bamboo Publishing Ltd and the Victoria & Albert Museum, 1986, p. [58](#). Often, however, designs were embroidered on top of woven patterned fabrics, and still are, to form a single or complementary message.





**Fig. 3 A pair of ducks linger by a large clump of lotus, conveying the message of matrimonial harmony and union. The seedpods in the picture ensure a fertile future. Detail from a screen. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.**

PART I

SYMBOLS  
FROM  
NATURE





**Fig. 4 The combination of peonies and crab apple blossoms expresses the wish that one's home will be honored. Detail from a screen. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.**

## Chapter 1

# FLOWERS AND PLANTS

Flowers and plants (and their roots, which have a special significance in Chinese philosophy and medicine) play a major role in Chinese thought and art but seem to have no ancient symbolic roots as, for example, animals have (Fig. 7).<sup>1</sup> In the words of art historian Werner Speiser, “We have more than ten thousand bronzes and tens of thousands of pots from Chinese antiquity to examine, and we find practically no trace of a plant or plantlike motif.”<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that ancient China was unaware of plants, for one of the oldest textile motifs we have is of simple rows of heart-shaped leaves.

It was most likely Buddhism, however, slowly pressing into China via the Silk Road, that spurred the use of floral motifs in China. Once introduced, however, during the Tang Dynasty (CE 618–907) – and especially from the Ming Dynasty (CE 1368–1644) on – flowers and plants became popular motifs, rich in color, fragrance, and symbolism. “Because of myths, folklore, tradition, some well-known historical events, or a popular verse or prose, [plants and flowers have] become symbols of a maxim, a moral attribute, or a personification.”<sup>3</sup> Today, a floral pattern on a Chinese vase or garment is not just a colorful or pleasing design, but also a medium by which a mood, a season, a sentiment, or a wish is conveyed.<sup>4</sup>

Flowers are not grouped randomly in Chinese flower arrangements, as they are so often in the West, but follow strict principles, sometimes right down to the shape of the vase they should be displayed in. A sprig of plum blossoms, for example, should be displayed in a classic *méipíng* (梅瓶) vase, literally a “plum vase,” whose very narrow neck and broad shoulders display a branch of flowering plum blossoms to perfection.

It is understood that “when two or more kinds of flowers are placed in the same vase, these should be ones that naturally grow in the same environment *or that suggest a single symbolic idea* [author’s italics]. They should be so arranged as to seem to grow out of one branch.”<sup>5</sup>

Painters, sculptors, potters, and other artisans in China were thus left off the naturalist hook, free to create their own compositions that communicated the desired message. Frequently, in Chinese art, nature yields to the artist's desire to communicate and a single vine will be shown bearing a variety of flowers (even flowers that normally grow on stems) as the vine itself extends the felicitation represented by the choice of flower(s) into an “unbroken, or never-ending” wish. Experts differ on how the vine was introduced into Chinese art. Some believe it was derived from the Greek acanthus scroll developed by Greek architects to decorate buildings, introduced to China from the Mediterranean world via Central Asia,<sup>6</sup> while others believe the original vine was honeysuckle, entering China via the Silk Road from India.

The complexity of identifying various flowers on ceramics or carved in wood, called for them to be highly stylized for instant identification. Hence, one need not be a botanist to identify the most popular flowers and plants found on Chinese porcelain, carving, and embroidery, but need only pay attention to certain artistic devices that are explained below.

The Chinese revere flowers and plants in their natural surroundings, which is why the garden and potted plants are the highest form of horticultural art in China as opposed to artificial arrangements of cut flowers.<sup>7</sup> Gardens were supposed to represent nature in its entirety with a careful balance of contrasting *yīn* and *yáng* elements (dark and light, shade and sun, pools of water and hills). The latter (hills and pools) forms the two basic building blocks of Chinese landscape artistry and is why the Chinese word for “landscape” paintings is *shānshuǐ* (山水), literally “mountains (*shān* 山) and water (*shuǐ* 水) (Fig. 5).” Shrubbery and flowers are used to fill in and round off the scene.

The concept of mountains and pools of water reaches its apogee in mountains and seas, which has become a means of expressing “limitlessness” or “embodying all.” One of the most popular eight-character couplets found in all calligraphy shops and gracing millions of scrolls, is that popularly used as a sixtieth birthday gift, composed of two antithetical four-character expressions:





Fig. 5 The simple landscape design on the cover of this paste box consists of mountains (*shān*) and water (*shuǐ*), earning landscapes the Chinese name *shānshuǐ*.

福如东海 (*Fú rú dōng hǎi*) 寿比南山 (*Shòu bǐ nán shān*) May one's fortune  
be as vast as the Eastern Sea,

And one's life as long as the Southern Mountain.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, the extreme popularity of the Chinese landscape scene featuring mountains and a vast sea (inland or ocean).<sup>9</sup>

Each month of the lunar calendar has its associated flower: first month, plum; second month, peach blossoms; third month, tree peony; fourth month, cherry blossoms; fifth month, magnolia; sixth month, pomegranate; seventh month, lotus/orchid; eighth month, pear blossoms; ninth month, mallow blossoms; tenth month, chrysanthemum; eleventh month, gardenia; and twelfth month, poppy.<sup>10</sup>

Seasonal groupings of flowers are a common theme in Chinese art, frequently presented as four panels on a screen or as a set of scrolls, the primary flower immediately identifying the season: the peony, spring; the lotus or iris, summer; the chrysanthemum, autumn; and the prunus (early flowering fruit trees, most typically plum blossoms as they are the first of all the fruit trees to flower), winter.<sup>11</sup> Other appropriate seasonal flowers are sometimes added or

substituted: spring, wisteria; summer, willow; autumn, grapes; and winter, pine. Screens with the four-seasons motif are so ubiquitous one can open any upmarket decorating magazine and find one enhancing a Manhattan or Hong Kong apartment.

Landscape paintings can also be identified by season once you know the conventions used by many traditional Chinese painters. In the words of the great Northern Song landscape painter Guō Xī (郭熙): “Spring mountains are lightly adorned and seem to be smiling. Summer mountains are richly green, dripping with moisture. Autumn mountains are bright and lucid, well attired. Winter mountains are cold and desolate, as if asleep.... Spring water is green, summer water jade-green, autumn water is blue and winter’s is black.... [The sky is] dazzling in spring, brilliant blue in summer, clear in autumn and dark in winter.”<sup>12</sup> An astute observer will soon be able to discern the differences.



Fig. 6 Although this is a modern glass-painted snuff bottle, the artist chose one of the most classical

combinations of subjects known in China – birds and flowers, a combination known as *huāniǎo*.

Traditional pairings of flowers and birds (known as *huāniǎo* 花鸟 in Chinese, literally “flowers [and] birds”), are another important convention in Chinese art (Fig. 6).<sup>13</sup> Individuals belonging to these pairings are rarely seen in other combinations. Ducks and egrets are paired with the lotus (see Fig. 3); long-tailed birds such as pheasants, peacocks, and cocks with the peony; cuckoos with azaleas; storks and cranes with pines (see Fig. 125); magpies with plum blossoms (see Fig. 138); sparrows with bamboo; swallows with willows (or apricots) (see Fig. 165),<sup>14</sup> and quails and other small game birds with millet (see Fig. 120). The various pairings all have symbolic meanings as well as being naturally complementary. As we shall see below, the same flower can suggest different meanings when in different settings and contexts.

Flowers and plants may also be an important clue to identifying historical or literary references. For example, a popular motif used by stone, ivory, and jade carvers and immediately recognizable by most Chinese is a sculpture depicting a mountain of flowers and fruit. This is the famous setting associated with the much-loved monkey Sūn Wùkōng (孫悟空) in the opening of the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West* (*Xī Yóu Jì* 西游记). By daring to pass through a “water-curtain cave,” Sūn Wùkōng earns the respect of all the inhabitants of this wondrous mountain, which is his birthplace and home (see MONKEY p. 137).

Similarly, if the figure studied is one of a group (typically three or eight figures) and is holding a basket of flowers, it could be the hermaphrodite Lán Cǎi (蓝采) of the Eight Immortals (see p. 180 and Fig. 425) or a representation of the Daoist Goddess of Flowers Huā Xiān (和), who is often depicted with her two handmaidens.

Flowers represent feminine sweetness and beauty in Chinese art, and Soame Jenyns notes: “A Chinese artist when asked to paint a young girl would sooner sketch a sprig of blossom than the girl herself. It is the symbol of her maidenhood which interests, not her personality.”<sup>15</sup> A bride’s face used to be referred to as “the flowery face,”<sup>16</sup> akin to the British expression “an English rose.” Sweet-smelling jasmine, the magnolia, and the red azalea were particularly associated with feminine beauty. To underscore the association of women with flowers, portraits of women were often accessorized with fluttering butterflies. And to this day, popular Chinese girls’ names almost always include a reference to a

flower. A well-known example of this is the Song Dynasty heroine made famous by the Disney movie *Mulan* (*Huā Mùlán* 花木兰), whose name literally means that her family name is “Flower” and her given name “Magnolia.”

During the Tang (CE 618–907) and Song (CE 960–1279) Dynasties, flowers such as the apricot, peach, plum (or other prunus), lotus, and chrysanthemum were especially popular hair ornaments, both real and artificial, the latter made from satin, gold, pearls, and other precious materials.<sup>17</sup> White jade was commonly used, for example, to represent chrysanthemum petals. Even the emperor and his officials would wear flowers in their headgear on special occasions.

Interestingly, the flower which in the West perhaps best personifies the attributes of flowers and is traditionally imbued with such virtues as femininity and sensuality – the rose – has no special symbolic meaning in China and rarely appears either in literary references or in Chinese art.

## APRICOT BLOSSOMS

The apricot (*xìng* 杏) belongs to the prunus category of flowering fruit trees and therefore is associated with beauty and spring, but it has an even more auspicious symbolism because of its homophones *xìng* (幸, “good fortune”) and *xīng* (兴, “to prosper, prevail, become popular”). It is because of these associations that the famous painting *Spring’s Beautiful Message* shows the Emperor Yōngzhèng (雍正, r. 1723–35) handing his son, the future Emperor Qiánlóng (乾隆, r. 1736–95), a spray of flowering apricot. The message is clear: the father is handing over his empire to his son with the hope that he will have the good fortune of being a popular ruler. A beautiful example of a longevity stone (*shòushí* 寿石) is in the scroll’s foreground (see ROCKS AND STONES p. 64).





Fig. 7 A 100 Flowers motif carries with it felicitous wishes. Note the *rúyì* border design (see p. [212](#)).

## ARTEMISIA LEAF

A pinnatifid (cleft) or serrated leaf, often depicted surrounded by streamers or ribbons, is most likely an artemisia leaf (Fig. [8](#)), popularly known as **mugwort** (*ài* 艾, *Artemisia Vulgaris*), and a member of a group of auspicious objects known as the Eight Precious Things (*bābǎo* 八宝).<sup>19</sup> Objects that belong to this group come from a larger general group of auspicious items that includes pearls, a mirror, lozenges, stone chimes, scrolls, golden coins, ivory tusks, sticks of coral, pairs of rhinoceros horns, and other good luck charms (see individual entries pp. [228–9](#)). As a result, the actual grouping can vary, but always totals eight. The inclusion of mugwort in this group was restricted to more common textiles and



porcelain decorations, however, and a leaf never appears on such important textiles as rank badges or dragon robes although it does appear on Ming Dynasty festival badges used during the Dragon Boat Festival (Duānwǔ jié (端五节) celebrated on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month (Fig. 9).<sup>20</sup>

Mugwort leaves are symbolic of protective and curative herbs and are thus associated with longevity. The smoke from burning artemisia leaves used to be used to preserve stored grain in the first century BCE, and a later reference (CE 1085) mentions its use to ward off mosquitoes. Because artemisia leaves are supposed to resemble tiger paws, they were once pasted on the sides of gates in China to protect residents from danger (see tiger p. 145).



Fig. 8 *Artemisia*, which is also known as mugwort, is easily identified by its ragged (pinnatifid or cleft) leaves. Its auspiciousness comes from its protective powers.

## BAMBOO

One of the plants linked most strongly with China, bamboo (*zhú* 竹) is not only beautiful, but also infinitely utilitarian (Fig. 12).<sup>21</sup> It is also rich in

symbolism and serves as a metaphor for youth and suppleness (“young bamboo is easily bent” is a common Chinese saying), strength and endurance (because of its ability to survive the strongest of storms), as well as humility and a pure heart (because of its hollow stem) (Fig. 11). Daoists, therefore, employed bamboo as a means of showing strength in (apparent) weakness; the bamboo yields to the storm and hence is not uprooted or broken and survives. Confucians likened bamboo’s ability to bend without breaking to being a desirable virtue in a “gentleman” (*jūnzi* 君子), and the painting of bamboo in the same black ink as one writes Chinese characters was said to be a fundamental accomplishment of a correct education. For the Confucians, bamboo represents integrity.



Fig. 9 This Ming Dynasty festival badge, which would have been worn on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, considered the most dangerous day of the year, exhibits a number of protective charms – a tiger, together with artemisia and calamus (tall, thin, sword-shaped) leaves. Look carefully and you will spot the Five Poisonous Creatures and a number of auspicious symbols such as the branching coral and longevity stones. Courtesy of the Chris Hall Collection Trust (on loan to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore).

In artistic groupings, the combination of bamboo (humility) and rocks (steadfastness) represents the virtuous qualities of a Confucian gentleman. Bamboo was so strongly associated with virtue and learning that bamboo brushpots became prized possessions of the literati class and porcelain brushpots were even made to imitate bamboo pots (Fig. [14](#)). One Chinese artist-poet of the Song Dynasty, Sū Dōngpō (苏东坡), even stated that he would rather go without meat than live without bamboo.<sup>[22](#)</sup>

Bamboo and prunus (plum, apricot, and other fruit tree blossoms) depicted together represent a married couple and the combination is known as the “double happiness of bamboo and plum” (*zhú méi shuāngxǐ* 竹梅双喜) (Fig. [10](#)).

Bamboo and orchids together comprise another common artistic coupling. One of the finest scrolls depicting this combination by the Ming Dynasty artist Wén Zhēngmíng (文徵明), entitled *Cymbidium and Bamboo*, today hangs in the Taipei National Museum.

When bamboo and orchids are combined with plum and chrysanthemum flowers, the combination represents the four seasons of the year and is known as *sìjūnzi* (四君子), translated variously as the Four Gentlemen, Four Noble Characters, Four Princely Men, or Four Plants of Virtue (Fig. [13](#)).

Bamboo, prunus flowers, and pine form a very famous motif in Chinese art known as the Three Friends of Winter (*sūihán sānyǒu* 岁寒三友) (see [PINE](#) p. [51](#), [52](#)).

Bamboo is also said to be symbolic of filial piety because it grows in thickets or groves close to its “parents.”

One of the most important roles bamboo (*zhú* 竹) plays in art is that it has a homophone that means “wish, or to convey a wish, congratulate” (*zhù* 祝), so its inclusion in a grouping of flowers or a landscape is used to strengthen the “wishing you [whatever]” component of an artistic wordless message.



Fig. 10 When bamboo and prunus are shown together, the combination is known as *zhú méi shuāngxǐ* or the “double happiness of bamboo and plum”, representing a married couple. Detail from a modern screen. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.



Fig. 11 Bamboo displays traits of strength and endurance as well as humility and a pure heart. Detail from a modern lacquer cabinet.





Fig. 12 Close-up of bamboo painted with black ink and a calligraphy brush.



Fig. 13 The combination of bamboo, orchids, prunus, and chrysanthemum, each of which represents one season of the year, is known as the Four Gentlemen (*sìjūnzǐ*).



Fig. 14 Bamboo brush holder with a monk figure in relief. Carved by Wu Zhifan (or Ruzhen), Jiading, China. Seventeenth century. Ht 15 cm, diam. 8.3 cm. © Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.



## BANANA

Banana or **plantain** (*jiāo* 蕉) trees are not real trees, botanists tell us, but rather giant herbs. Nevertheless, banana tree leaves and plants are such popular plants in Chinese gardens and art that we must include them (Fig. [15](#)). There are ancient references to these plants in Chinese texts as the plant was used both for its fiber as well as its fruit, but for our purposes, the function it plays in Chinese art is unrelated to either of these two utilitarian roles, but rather to its beautiful large leaves. “From Tang poetry we learn that it was the sounds made by the huge leaves even more than their shape and color which captured the Chinese imagination. The wind rustling them, the raindrops falling on them, and the water dropping from them enhanced the slightly melancholy or introspective mood associated with darkness, storms, decay, or autumn.”<sup>23</sup> A few such plants outside of one’s studio window would indeed have contributed both visually and aurally on a rainy day. See p. [213](#) and Fig. [483](#).



Fig. 15 Classical Chinese gardens called for at least a few banana plants, with their distinctive large leaves, as they not only provided lush green foliage but also an atmosphere of tranquility and peace in light rain. Here is a small banana grove in Shanghai’s famous Yu Garden (Yùyuán), which dates back to the Ming Dynasty. Plantain leaves were later used as a popular border motif, especially on ceramics (see p. [213](#)).

## BINDWEED

Because bindweed (a member of the Morning Glory family *Convolvulus*, which in Latin means “to bind around”) commonly grows entwined in pine trees, it symbolizes the bonding relationship of love and marriage (Fig. 17). The leaves of field bindweed are smooth and round when young but become arrowhead-shaped with lobed bottoms when mature. Morning Glories are known as *qiānniú* (牽牛), “to lead an ox” (Fig. 16). “The use of this name relates to the tradition that the seeds once cured a farmer of his illness and he led his cattle to the fields to give thanks to the plant which saved his life.”<sup>24</sup> Another common vine, the cypress vine known as *niǎoluó* (萋蘿), is also sometimes depicted, with the same symbolism as bindweed.



Fig. 16 Bindweed symbolizes the bonding relationship of love and marriage. Its name in Chinese, *niǎoluó* or *qiānniú*, means “to lead an ox.” This name is said to have been given them when a farmer led

his cattle to the fields to give thanks to the plant, whose seeds saved his life. Valder, *The Garden Plants of China*, p. [190](#).



Fig. 17 While bindweed symbolizes the bonding relationship of love and marriage, lilies symbolize peace, giving the combination a particularly pleasant overtone of marital harmony. Detail from a modern scroll. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

## CALAMUS

Also called **Sweet Flag** and **Flag Root** in English, calamus (*chānglán* 菖兰 or *chāngpú* 菖蒲) is a tall plant found in streams, marshes, and on the edges of ponds. It is occasionally depicted in paintings, on ceramics, and even in textiles. Its fragrant sword-shaped leaves (*Calamus margaritae*), which resemble “those of a large flag-iris,”<sup>[25](#)</sup> were once pasted on the gates of homes in Imperial China (together with the artemisia leaf, see p. [20](#)) to protect residents from danger, especially at that most dangerous time of the year, the fifth day of the fifth month (see FIVE p. [226](#)). Like the artemisia leaf, it can be found on Ming Dynasty festival badges celebrating Duānwǔjié (端五节) Double Five (see Fig. [9](#)). “To see the plant in bloom was regarded as an omen of good fortune and it was believed to



prolong life and promote intelligence when taken as an infusion.”<sup>26</sup> Its leaves, said to be able to cure diseases, are a folk medicine staple. In Chinese herbal shops, its oil is a common toothache remedy.

Sweet flag was a very popular plant in miniature garden (*pénjǐng* 盆景) arrangements, better known by their Japanese name bonsai, typically in combination with rock. Today, one finds many Ming Dynasty scrolls showing examples of *pénjǐng* featuring this combination. “Because sweet flag was associated with immortality, sweet flag *pénjǐng* may have been birthday gifts, and thus paintings of them may have been tied to this type of social occasion.”<sup>27</sup>

Sweet Flag is also associated with midsummer and features in floral arrangements of other midsummer flowers and plants such as hollyhock, pomegranate flowers, gardenia, and day lilies. “Like container plantings of sweet flag on rock, the use of various garden flowers during the midsummer festival to ward off evil and bring auspicious forces into the home appears to have an important place within the production of vase arrangements.”<sup>28</sup>

## CAMELLIA

The common camellia (*Camellia*), an evergreen that includes the tea family, is indigenous in China where it thrives in the mountains and valleys of Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guangdong Provinces (Fig. 18).<sup>29</sup> It is known by a variety of names but generally as “mountain tea” (*shānchá* 山茶) or the descriptive “winter hardy” (*nàidōng* 耐冬). Because its red flowers bloom at the beginning of winter, often standing out in sharp contrast to the white snow, it symbolizes winter and endurance and is frequently found in winter floral arrangements or winter landscape paintings together with other winter flowers such as narcissus and wintersweet.

Camellias feature prominently in Chinese New Year decorations together with narcissus, nandina, and the *língzhī* fungus because all are “auspicious plants symbolising good luck, longevity and prosperity.”<sup>30</sup> There is a plate in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London with such a grouping, in the popular *famille rose* color scheme, with a Yōngzhèng (1723–35) reign mark.<sup>31</sup> Another variety with yellow flowers is known as *Camellia chrysanta*, “golden camellia” (*jīnhuāchá* 金花茶).



Fig. 18 Camellias, an evergreen that includes the tea family, and phoenixes decorate a modern tea cannister.



Fig. 19 The very flamboyant *Camellia Japonica*. Camellias were named after one of the early botanists who identified them, Georg Josef Kamel, who died in Manila in 1706. The Chinese associate them with the end of winter and the Chinese Lunar New Year.

## CASSIA

Chinese cassia (*Cinnamomum cassia*) is an evergreen and a member of the laurel family.<sup>32</sup> Hence these trees have smooth leaves that are ovoid in shape and resemble laurel leaves. It is easily recognized by its flowers, which are bright yellow and hang in bright long stocks. Cassia is a very large genus of approximately 500 species. One of its best known in the Western world is the golden showers tree. Many English-language texts refer to cassia as cinnamon or even Chinese cinnamon, but cassia is the correct translation (Fig. 20).

Its Chinese name is *guìpí* (桂皮), although it is often referred to as just *guì*, which has a homophone (*guì* 贵) meaning “of high rank, noble” as well as



“precious, highly valued,” so the addition of any member of the cassia genus to a scene adds these explicit positive meanings. A sprig of cassia flowers is often part of a porcelain vase’s bouquet of flowers (and hence, felicitous sentiments), and large sprigs of cassia are easily spotted in the arms of children in such portraits as “The One Hundred Children” in an enactment known as “children spreading out wealth” (*sàncáitóngzǐ* 散财童子) (see p. [156](#)).

When cassia (denoting “high rank”) is depicted with peach blossoms (symbolizing longevity), the combination has the meaning “longevity with high rank.” When it is depicted with seeds or nuts (symbolizing male offspring), the motif expresses the ubiquitous Chinese desire for sons who will attain high office (see CHINESE DATE p. [47](#)).

The Chinese once used the literary expression “to break off a cassia twig” to refer to (the sweetness of) passing the state examinations that would qualify one as a civil servant, and during the Song Dynasty the tablet on which successful graduates’ names were listed was known as the “cassia register” (*guìjí* 桂籍).<sup>[34](#)</sup> Cassia is so strongly associated with examination success (and thereby the security and rewards of a successful career), its presence in a picture or still life is almost always a reference to high rank. *Lǚ Bān’s Secret Chart* (*Lǚ Bān Jīng* 鲁班经), a fifteenth-century instruction manual once used by carpenters, suggests that the placement of a cassia leaf in the bracket of a column could serve as a charm to bring scholarly success to the house’s inhabitants.<sup>[33](#)</sup>



Fig. 20

*Cinnamomum cassia*, the aromatic bark of the tree found throughout Asia and used as a folk remedy.

The depiction of a hare by a cassia tree is an allusion to the moon that both are said to inhabit (see RABBIT p. [142](#)). Could you ever doubt that a cassia tree would not only grow in the courtyard of the Palace of the Moon but also possess special powers?<sup>[35](#)</sup> The hare that lives on the moon is often depicted grinding the elixir of immortality with a mortar and pestle under a cassia tree (or sometimes a sweet olive tree [*Osmanthus fragrans*] (see p. [40](#))). Because one of the sweet olive’s

names is also *gui*, there has been some textual confusion although they are quite different in appearance. (Perhaps the rabbit also grinds a little fragrant cassia in his spare time when he is not busy preparing the elixir of immortality.)

## CHRYSANTHEMUM

One Chinese text calls chrysanthemums (*Dendranthema morifolium*) the “gentleman of flowers” as they are “not as pretty and coquettish as the plum and the peach” and are said to be symbolic of intellectual accomplishments (Fig. [22](#)).<sup>36</sup> Chrysanthemums (*jú* 菊) are said to begin blooming during the ninth month of the year and hence are also associated with the number nine and autumn (Fig. [21](#)). During the ninth month or Chrysanthemum Moon (菊月) during the Ming Dynasty, “chrysanthemum parties were held and an enormous display of all kinds of chrysanthemums was prepared for the Emperor.”<sup>37</sup> It is easy to date the season a picture is supposed to represent if the courtyard is full of pots of chrysanthemums, or if chrysanthemum blossoms fill a flower vase. Traditionally, pots of chrysanthemums were placed on planks at different heights to create artificial chrysanthemum hills or pagodas in city courtyards and reception halls.

Chrysanthemums are sometimes combined with maple leaves to emphasize the season (autumn) but can also be expressing “all in abundance,” as the chrysanthemum (*jú* 菊) is a morpheme of a *jǔ* (举) that means “entire, whole,” and the maple (*fēng* 枫) has a homophone in another *fēng* (丰) that means “abundant, plentiful.” One contemporary Chinese text sums it up thus: “Chrysanthemum and maple leaf turn out a phrase of ‘live and work in peace and contentment.’”<sup>38</sup>



Fig. 21 Chrysanthemums and bamboo symbolize fall and winter; the reverse side of this porcelain jar depicts prunus and peonies for spring and summer. The small sparrow on the bamboo is a traditional bird/flower pairing.

The Chinese have been cultivating chrysanthemums for more than 3,000 years and their cultivation is considered a virtuous occupation for cultured pensioners.<sup>39</sup> Hence, chrysanthemums also represent a life of happy middle or old age and retirement. Growing chrysanthemums in retirement has been a popular poetic theme since the fourth century when the famous pre-Tang Dynasty poet Táo Yuānmíng (陶淵明, CE 365–427) wrote his poems of renunciation and the return to nature. In fact, “a chrysanthemum by a bamboo hedge, or on a rock, or even alone always carries this overtone of autumn melancholy and also of a way of escape from troubles and tears: it speaks in praise of quietness, of delight in the simple life and in growing flowers, with a suggestion, as we should put it, of the reserves of nature’s power; in a word, it speaks of T’ao Yüan-ming.”<sup>40</sup> This motif became especially popular as a decorative motif in China during the Republican era in the 1920s and 1930s.

Chrysanthemum blossoms are believed to resemble the sun, the rich golds and yellows of their petals highlighting the association (Fig. [23](#)). Because of this connection with the sun and *yáng* forces, chrysanthemum tea and wine are still regarded by the Chinese as being especially life-sustaining and beneficial to one's health. George Kates was a young Western scholar lucky enough to have lived in Beijing during the late 1930s. He describes his autumnal activities as including the setting out of "many potted chrysanthemums [as] according to Chinese superstition their clean scent prolonged life. Everyone knew that the chrysanthemum was thus the flower of immortality; and one often heard that it was also admired because at the end it knew how to die with dignity and grace. In China one takes the allegory of flowers seriously."<sup>41</sup>

Chrysanthemum-shaped bowls and plates, with their distinctive "petals," were also popular and we find them in a number of materials, including ceramic, wood, lacquer, and even jade (see Fig. [112](#)).<sup>42</sup>

A magpie (*xǐquè* 喜鹊) amongst chrysanthemums (*jú* 菊) evokes the expression *jǔjiā huān lè* (举家欢乐), which can be interpreted as "joy coming to the whole family." The chrysanthemum (*jú* 菊) is a morpheme of the *jǔ* (举) meaning "entire, whole," and a magpie (*xǐquè* 喜鹊) is a symbol of happiness (*xǐ* 喜), of which *huānlè* is a synonym. Magpies in any picture also add the meaning of "coming your way" (see MAGPIE p. [77](#)).



Fig. 22 Chrysanthemums are said to be symbolic of intellectual accomplishments. Because they bloom in the autumn, they are associated with that season and are sometimes depicted together with maple leaves, a combination that creates the auspicious sentiment “all in abundance.”

Chrysanthemums and pine, symbols of autumn and winter respectively, together symbolize longevity.

Chrysanthemums combined with flowering plum blossoms and narcissus form a special arrangement known as the Three Hermits (see PRUNUS p. [38](#)).

The chrysanthemum is a member of the Four Gentlemen (*sìjūnzǐ* 四君子) grouping representing the four seasons, also known as the Four Noble Characters, Four Princely Men, and Four Plants of Virtue, together with the Japanese apricot (*xìng* 杏) or other types of prunus, the orchid, and the bamboo.

## CRAB APPLE BLOSSOMS

The red blossoms of a Chinese flowering crab apple (*hǎitáng* 海棠) were especially popular in Chinese art because the phoneme *táng* (堂) also means “hall.” One of the most popular auspicious phrases found on Chinese New Year



posters and greeting cards is the expression of a wish for material success: “May your wealth [gold and jade] fill a hall” (*jīn yù mǎn táng* 金玉满堂). When combined with white magnolia (*yùlán* 玉兰) and peonies (*fùguìhuā* 富贵花), the meaning is *yùtáng fúguì* (玉堂福贵) or “wealth (*fú* 福) and rank (*guì* 贵) in the Jade (*yù* 玉) Hall (*táng* 堂)” (see MAGNOLIA p. 30 for reference to the Jade Hall). The flowering crab apple is often stylized in Chinese art as a four-petalled flower, its East–West axis petals being longer and slimmer than the more rounded and shorter North–South petals.



Fig. 23 Roof tiles on this building in Beijing’s Forbidden City have a chrysanthemum motif, linking them with the sun that beats down upon them.



Fig. 24 A 50 *rénmínbì* note featuring Mao Zedong and a chrysanthemum.



Fig. 25 Hibiscus symbolize happiness and honor, and are often paired with such flowers as the Sacred or

Japanese lily or the sweet olive.

## CYPRUS

See PINE p. [36](#).

## DAY LILY

Day lilies, *Hemerocallis fulva* (*xuāncǎo* 萱草), so-called because they only flower for one day, are indigenous to Asia where they were originally raised as a food crop. “The buds are harvested and eaten, the flowers are used in soups as flavoring, the leaves provide a salad ingredient, and the small white tubers in the roots are eaten in a similar way as water chestnuts.”<sup>[43](#)</sup>

Day lilies are associated with summer, so they are often found in combination with other summer flowers such as the lotus and pomegranate.

Day lilies depicted with a longevity stone is an arrangement known as *xuān shòu yán líng* (萱寿延龄), literally “day lilies and longevity stone prolonging life” (see rocks and stones p. [64](#)).

One of the most famous paintings of day lilies was by the flower-and-bird artist Yùn Shòupíng (恽寿平), one of the Six Great Masters of the early Qing Dynasty (CE 1633–1690). His painting of day lilies is accompanied by the poem, “How to make a peaceful courtyard? Plant this often. Loving its bright foliage is enough to forget worries.”<sup>[44](#)</sup> As a result, day lilies are also known as “forgetting worry” flowers.<sup>[45](#)</sup> In Taiwan, Hualien’s Sixty Rock Mountain, known for its day lilies, has a meeting place called the Forget Worries Garden Square. Day lilies are “also used to honor one’s mother.”<sup>[46](#)</sup>

If you ever spot a picture of day lilies with a butterfly, please contact this author (for an explanation, see BOWS AND ARROWS p. [248](#)).



Fig. 26 The iris seldom appears alone in Chinese art but more frequently with orchids in a combination known as *zhīlán*.

### FLAG ROOT

See calamus p. [23](#).

### FLOWERING PLUM

See prunus p. [38](#).

### FRAGRANT PLANTAIN LILY

See lily p. [26](#).

### HIBISCUS

Although there are many types of hibiscus, perhaps the most common is *Hibiscus mutabilis*, known in Chinese as *fúróng* (芙蓉) (Fig. [25](#)). Its flowers are used to symbolize happiness (*fú* 福) and honor (*róng* 荣). They are often coupled with the fragrant sweet olive (*Osmanthus fragrans*), known in Chinese as *guì* (桂) or *guìhuā* (桂花) (see p. [40](#)), and the evergreen plant known as the Sacred or Japanese lily (*Rohdea japonica*), with its long, smooth, green leaves and red berries, in Chinese known as *wànniánqīng* (万年青, see p. [39](#)). Together, they represent (literally “10,000”) “eternal (*wànnián* 万年) and precious (*guì* 贵) honor and happiness.” The hibiscus has been a popular painting motif since the Five Dynasties Period (CE 907–60). It is also the symbol of the city of Chengdu, which is sometimes called Hibiscus City (*Róngchéng* 蓉城).



Fig. 27 The lotus is one of the most common and symbolic flowers in Chinese art.

## IRIS

Irises (one of the most common varieties is *Iris tectorum*, popularly known as the “kite-tail flower” or *yuānw ě ihuā* (尾花) are not a common subject in Chinese paintings (it is the Japanese who have made the iris a popular subject), although when they appear with orchids (*lánhuā* 兰花), the combination is known as *zhīlán* (芝兰), which symbolizes noble character and true friendship (*zhīlán qìwèi* 芝兰气味) (Fig. [26](#)).

## LILY

The lily, whose name (*bǎihé* 百合) means “adds up to 100” because of the bulb’s many layers, has been cultivated in China since ancient times. The inclusion of the number “100” (*bǎi* 百) also makes them a frequent component of auspicious paintings and still lifes as their appearance enhances the blessing or wish “100-fold.”

Lilies also symbolize a life-long (literally in Chinese “100 years,” *bǎi nián* 百年) happy marriage (see Fig. [17](#)), as the first and last parts of *bǎihé* form the middle components of the four-character expression *bǎi nián hǎo hé* (百年好合) or “a long and good union.”

Another common pictorial composition of lilies (*bǎihé* 百合), a lotus (*hé* 荷) or box (*hé* 盒), and the evergreen Sacred or Japanese lily (*wànniánqīng* 万年青) can be read as *bái nián hé hé* (百年和合), which has the meaning of “a long and

peaceful union.”

The **fragrant plaintain lily** (*Hosta plantaginea*) is known in Chinese by the shape and color of its buds (*yùzān* 玉簪), literally “jade hairpins.” Hosta leaves are typically dark green, often with a distinctive white edge.

Lilies are also said to have the power to overcome evil spirits, which is why they were placed around the door and windows of homes on the most dangerous day of the year – the fifth day of the fifth lunar month (Double Five),<sup>47</sup> coinciding in most Chinese countries with the Dragon Boat Festival commemorating the suicide by drowning of the loyal scholar, statesman, and poet Qū Yuán (屈原, 343–277 BCE).

## LOTUS

The importance of the aquatic lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*) as a symbol of Buddhism helped make it one of the most common and central flowers in Chinese art (Fig. [27](#)).<sup>48</sup> Known in Chinese as *héhuā* (荷花) or *liánhuā* (莲花), it represents Buddhism (or qualities associated with Buddhism such as purity and harmony), as well as summer, longevity, nobility, elegance, curative powers, and (when depicted in a flower and bud combination) the union of marriage and fertility (Fig. [33](#)).

Very early examples of lotus scrolls and lotus decorations have been found in some of the oldest Buddhist caves along China’s Silk Route,<sup>49</sup> and one ancient record even notes their planting by a Han Dynasty Emperor (Zhāodì 昭帝, r. 87–74 BCE). From the Tang Dynasty on, Chinese bronze mirrors often took on the shape of the outline of a lotus.<sup>50</sup> Boxes were made in the same shape to store the mirrors.

Because the lotus rises undefiled from impure muddy waters, it embodies purity and perfection, and serves as a model to Buddhists who try to live a life of integrity and purity while living in a mundane world. The lotus’s stylized eight petals represent the Eightfold Path of Buddha’s teachings.<sup>51</sup> Guānyīn (观音), the Chinese Buddhist Goddess of Mercy (also commonly referred to as the Bodhisattva of Compassion), is commonly depicted holding a lotus flower together with a vase (the combination of a lotus and a vase each yield an element that together form the word “peace”) of heavenly nectar.<sup>52</sup> Be careful, though, because another divine female is also associated with the lotus in Chinese art –



the only female amongst the Eight Immortals, Hé Xiāngū (何仙姑) (Fig. [30](#)) (see pp. [201](#) and [208](#) for more on both women). She, too, is sometimes depicted holding a lotus which, together with a peach, are her symbols, but is much more worldly in her overall appearance than Guānyīn. Perhaps it is because of this connection with the Goddess of Mercy that pictures or paintings of lotus ponds or lotus continue to be found in Chinese doctors' waiting rooms and offices.



**Fig. 28 Lotus buds top the rails of the five Inner Golden River bridges just inside the Meridien Gate of Beijing's Forbidden City. While the middle bridge was reserved for the emperor, the two flanking bridges were for members of the royal family, and the two outer bridges for members of the court. Courtesy of Elfi Chandra.**



Fig. 29 Detail of a small Chinese rug depicting a branching lotus with a hovering butterfly, both symbols of summer. A flower and a butterfly shown together are also a sign of conjugal fidelity. Note the border of inter-locking round coins with square holes known as *liánqiánwén*.



Fig. 30 Hé Xiānggū, the only female member of the Eight Immortals, can be identified by the long-stemmed lotus she traditionally holds.



Fig. 31 A stylized lotus with seedpods decorates this contemporary porcelain vase. The design of blue (*qīng*) lotus (*lián*) on a white background is a very popular one in Chinese art because together they form a pun (*qīng lián*) that means “clean and uncorrupted.”



Fig. 32 Close-up of a lotus seedpod, representing fertility.

The lotus’s symbolism, however, is also derived from the various puns that can be made from its two names, *héhuā* (荷花) and *liánhuā* (莲花).<sup>53</sup> *Hé* (荷) is

homophonous with another *hé* (合), meaning “join, combine,” and another *hé* (和) that means “peace.” *Lián* (莲) is homophonous with a *lián* (连), meaning “to link or connect,” as in a relationship. Hence, lotus flowers are commonly combined with the double happiness marriage character (囍) to form an auspicious wedding combination signaling a happy union. This popular design is frequently found on women’s embroidered robes.<sup>54</sup>

A lotus depicted with ducks conveys the message of harmony and union (*héhé* 和合) in marriage because of the double meanings of *hé* and *lián* explained above (the ducks represent a married couple) (see Fig. 3 and DUCK p. 71). The alternative name for lotus (*lián* 莲) is also similar in sound to another word (*liàn* 恋) that means “long for, feel attached to,” which reinforces the conjugal sentiments that are said to exist between these birds that mate for life.

*Lián* (连) also means “successive,” so the lotus is also found in pictures expressing repeated or successive desires for wealth, promotion, descendants, success, etc. Its addition in an arrangement understood to be a birthday greeting (by, for example, the presence of a longevity stone), adds the familiar birthday meaning “many happy returns.”

A hairpin in the Palace Museum, Beijing collection shows an exquisite long-eared white jade rabbit on a blue enamel lotus leaf, most likely designed to be worn during the Mid-Autumn or Moon Festival, which would have been interpreted as “a long life lived in harmony or affection.” See RABBIT p. 142 to understand why rabbits represent longevity and immortality.

A lotus (*hé* 荷) depicted with a box (*hé* 盒) and a piece of *língzhī* (灵芝) fungus, similar in shape to the ornamental object known as a *rúyì* (如意), conveys the sentiment *héhé rúyì* (和合如意), “a harmonious (*hé* 和) union (*hé* 合) in which all one’s wishes will be fulfilled (*rúyì*).” Ceramic dishes can be found shaped as open lotuses, the sides molded of overlapping petals. Knobs or stoppers in the shape of lotus buds are especially common on Chinese jars and teapots.

Those who have seen a lotus in its natural environment will have seen that the plant is distinguished by bearing seedpods and flowers simultaneously (Fig. 31). To the Chinese, this visible state of fecundity is especially auspicious, made more so by the fact that the spoken sound *liánzǐ* can mean either “lotus seed” (莲子) or “successive children” (连子) in Chinese (Fig. 33). Carved wooden lotus pods with seeds were thus popular wedding gifts symbolizing the blessing of many progeny, and are still popular gift shop items in the Chinese world. Many are in

the shape of the symbolic scepter, the *rúyì*, to make them especially auspicious, adding the meaning “as many [offspring] as you may desire.”

A lotus seedpod depicted with a carp conveys the message “May you have plenty [a surplus] year after year.” Carp (*lǐ* 舍里) is a pun on another *lǐ*, which means “profit” (利). Fish (*yú* 鱼) is a pun on another *yú* (余) that means “surplus.” Hence, the popular pictures of fish swimming amongst lotus that are really expressing the desire for continuing profits.

If you come across a picture of a small child standing on a lotus flower, you are looking at the visualization of the Chinese expression *liánshēng guìzǐ* 莲生贵子 (“lotus brings forth valuable seeds”) with its double meaning of “[Hope you have the] continual birth of successful or precious children” (连生贵子) (Fig. 33).

Sometimes a child will hold a lotus, a set of reed pipes or mouth organ known as a *shēng* (笙) – that serves as a homophone for the concepts of “success or professional promotion” (*shēng* 升) as well as “giving birth” (*shēng* 生) – and a sprig of cassia (yellow flowers from the laurel or bay tree), which together translate into a desire for “repeated generations of successful sons.” The morpheme for *cassia* (*guì* 桂, see p. 24) is a homophone for the term “of high rank or noble” (*guì* 贵) as well as “precious,” a term often applied to mean “children.”

A lotus with a lotus bud, however, has a more literary meaning. It is the wish for successful completion of the state examinations that will transform a candidate into a civil service official. A lotus (*lián* 莲) flower (*huā* 花) with (*jí* 及) a lotus bud (*dì* 蒂) – which can be described as *lián huā jí dì* (莲花及蒂) – can be interpreted as *lián kē jí dì* (连禾斗及第) or “May you pass your examinations one after another” where *lián* (连) means “repeatedly, one after another,” *kē* (禾斗) refers to academia, and *jí dì* (及第) means “to pass an imperial examination.”<sup>55</sup>

The popular combination of a lotus with white egrets or herons (both are known as *lù* 鹭) or storks (*guàn* 鹤),<sup>56</sup> which, like the lotus, remain unsullied white in swamps, is an allusion to the Confucian ideal of an incorruptible official, *lù* being a homophone for “an official’s salary” (禄) and *guān* being a homophone for “official” (官).<sup>57</sup> This motif was particularly popular on the belt toggles worn by Chinese gentry. The combination of a lotus (*lián* 莲) and egret (*lù* 鹭) was also a discreet pictorialization of the wish for “repeated success along the way [of one’s career],” as *lù* sounds not only like “egret” but also “road or path” (*lù* 路)



and “an official’s salary” (*lù* 禄).



Fig. 33 This traditional Chinese New Year (*niánhuà*) poster, with happy children riding on the back of a fat carp in a luxuriant field of lotus, wishes one continuing profits and abundance in all things in the years to come. Notice there are lotus buds, flowers, and seedpods all in the same picture. Courtesy of the IISH Stefan R. Landsberger Collection (website: <http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger>).

A goldfish (*jīnyú* 金鱼) wrapped (*bāo* 包) in a lotus leaf (*hé* 荷) expresses the wish for “a surplus or abundance of gold [money] in your purse” when the four characters are scrambled to read *hébāo jīnyú*. Read this way, *hébāo* (荷包) refers to a small purse, *jīn* (金) money, and *yú* (余) is a pun on the word fish (*yú* 鱼) that here can be interpreted as “a surplus” (*yú* 余).

Seasonally, the lotus represents summer as it blossoms June through August, and hence, maturity. In scenes of mixed flowers it will therefore be depicted together with day lilies and other summer flowers. The lotus itself is said to have curative powers and the entire plant is used medicinally (it is prescribed, for example, as an antidote for both alcohol and mushroom poisoning).

Shoes for bound feet in classical China were known as “lotus seeds” or “lotus flowers,”<sup>58</sup> while bound feet themselves were often euphemistically referred to as “golden lotuses.” The practice is said to have evolved from a fashion popular amongst palace dancers, with the terminology derived from a special platform in the shape of a giant golden lotus on which palace dancers walked and later danced approximately 500 CE. Howard Levy reports that “the making of a lotus out of gold may have been in imitation of Indian tradition, for the fifth-century pilgrim Fa Hsien [in Pīnyīn, Fǎxiǎn 法顯] stated in his travel account that an Indian king made one in honor of an assemblage of priests.”<sup>59</sup> Some artisans have carefully crafted the small lotus roots depicted on such feminine objects as ceramic cosmetic dishes to resemble the dainty lotus foot and leg of a woman who would have worn these lotus shoes (Fig. 34).



Fig. 34 A beautiful celadon ceramic cosmetic storage dish with three separate compartments. The top of the box is decorated with lotus flowers, buds, seedpods, and roots, which together resemble delicate shoe-clad feet on shapely calves. Could this be the origin of the Chinese term “lotus shoes” when referring to the shoes worn by women with bound feet? After all, the ideal 3-inch foot was often referred to as a lotus bud.

Finally, if the lotus is part of a prominent design on a blue-and-white vase, it could be a vase known as an “award vase” (*shǎngpíng* 赏并瓦), dating from the Yōngzhèng Period (CE 1723–35) onward, that were made to be given explicitly as awards to officials. “The neck is decorated with plantain leaves in underglaze blue and the belly with intertwining lotus scrolls. The Chinese character for blue is ‘青’ (*qīng*) and the character for lotus is ‘莲’ (*lián*). The combination of the two is a pun on the message the emperor liked to convey to his officials: 清廉 (*qīng lián*), meaning ‘clean and uncorrupted’ or ‘honest and upright.’”<sup>60</sup>

Another famous vase depicting lotuses together with sea birds flying above the sea dates from the Qiánlóng Period. Its meaning is “calm seas and clear river” (*hǎiyàn héqīng* 海宴河清), symbolizing the peaceful prosperity of the kingdom under the Emperor Qiánlóng (r. 1736–95). The homophones at work are the sea birds (*hǎiyàn* 海燕), lotus (*hé* 荷), and the blue (*qīng* 青) glazing of the vase.<sup>61</sup>



Fig. 35 A 20 *rénmínbì* note featuring Mao Zedong and a lotus. This note also has a lotus watermark.



Fig. 36 The magnolia is one of the flowers that is said to best represent feminine beauty.

## MAGNOLIA

The magnolia is known as *mùlán* (木兰) in Chinese (Fig. 36).<sup>62</sup> A white magnolia (*Magnolia denudata*) is known as a “jade orchid” (*yùlán* 玉兰) due to its beautiful white jade (*yù*) color and the orchid-like aroma of its fleshy petals. “The magnolia was once grown only by Chinese emperors and roots were bestowed on those who had gained special favor.”<sup>63</sup> It is one of the flowers traditionally used to represent feminine beauty.

When you find a picture of white magnolias combined with peonies (*fùguìhuā* 富贵花) and crab apple blossoms (*hǎitáng* 海棠), you are looking at a popular Ming and Qing Dynasty artistic floral arrangement that can be translated as “wealth and rank in the Jade Hall” (*yùtáng fùguì* 玉堂富贵).<sup>64</sup> This is because there is another *táng* (堂) that means “main hall in a house.” Yùtáng (Jade Hall) is a classical literary reference to imperial China’s famous Hanlin Academy, so a more modern colloquial understanding would be “graduation congratulations.” See CRAB APPLE BLOSSOMS p. 25, PEONY p. 34, and JADE p. 62.

The deciduous shrub or tree known as *Magnolia kobus*, which is one of the earliest magnolias to flower in the spring, is known in Chinese as *mùbǐ* (木笔). As a result, Chinese artists sometimes borrow the magnolia as a surrogate for another *bì* (必) that means “certainly or surely.” For example, when a magnolia is depicted with the special stones known as longevity stones (*shòushí* 寿石, see p. 64), the meaning is “surely you will have a long life” (Fig. 38).





Fig. 37 A flowering magnolia branch in Shanghai's famous Yu Garden.



Fig. 38 A small magnolia tree has been planted in front of a special assemblage of longevity stones in Beijing's Forbidden City to create the sentiment "surely you will have a long life."

The magnolia is also sometimes depicted with another plant known as fragrant thoroughwort (*lāncǎo* 兰草) to give the meaning "pure and noble." In the famous poem *Lí Sāo* (离骚) written by Qū Yuán (屈原, 343–277 BCE),<sup>65</sup> "the fragrant thoroughwort [is made] symbolic of Confucian loyalty and virtue."<sup>66</sup>

Sometimes the Chinese Scholar Tree (*huái* 槐) (*Sophora japonica*), Dalian's official flower, is substituted for the magnolia tree.<sup>67</sup> Beijing is also famous for its Chinese Scholar Trees, including the one in Jingshan Park behind the imperial Palace from which the last Ming Emperor Chóngzhēn (崇祯, r. 1628–44) hanged himself in 1644.

In 2004, the Chinese government announced finding some believed to be over 1,200 years old in the northern city of Tianjin. The Chinese Scholar Tree flower is quite beautiful when the tree blooms in late May and early June.

## MAPLE



The leaves of the maple (*fēng* 枫) are almost always depicted in their autumnal glory in Chinese art so are often paired with chrysanthemums and other autumnal plants and flowers. The special combination of maple and chrysanthemum is used to express the auspicious state of having “all in abundance” as the chrysanthemum (*jú* 菊) is a morpheme of the *jǔ* (举) that means “entire, whole,” while the maple (*fēng* 枫) is a linguistic standin for another *fēng* (丰) that means “abundant, plentiful.”

## MARIGOLD

Known as the “flower of 10,000 years [= eternal life]” (*wànshòuhuā* 万寿花), marigolds were closely associated with chrysanthemums. Because of this relationship with longevity, they were frequently used as the background motif on court robes, especially during the Qiánlóng Period (1736–95) in recognition of the length of both the emperor’s life and reign.<sup>68</sup> Although Qiánlóng could have been China’s longest reigning emperor, he stepped down after sixty years on the throne out of deference to his beloved grandfather, the Emperor Kāngxī (康熙), who ruled from 1661 to 1722. It was during the Emperor Qiánlóng’s rule that tea became firmly established in England, and with it a craze for teacups and teapots.

## MUGWORT

See artemesia leaf p. [20](#).

## NANDINA

This is the common name of *Nandina domestica*, an evergreen or semi-evergreen woody shrub that is a member of the *Berberidaceae* family. Its name comes from its delicate, bamboo-like foliage, which gives it its English name of Heavenly Bamboo. It starts out maroon, turning green as it matures. This plant is indigenous to China but has been transplanted worldwide. It has inconspicuous small white flowers in early summer that turn to green berries that ripen to bright red and remain on the plant through fall and winter (Fig. [40](#)). The Chinese name for nandina is *nántiānzhú* (楠天竹) or just *tiānzhú* (天竹). When you spot a large clump of red berries in a Chinese painting, the chances are very high that it

is nandina (Fig. [40](#)).



Fig. 39 Evergreens represent long life and endurance.



Fig. 40 Two quails forage amongst fallen autumn leaves, with some bright red berries of the Heavenly Bamboo plant at their feet. Detail from a modern screen. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

Its usefulness in Chinese paintings comes from two aspects: the beautiful red of its berries, as well as the composition of its name, which gives us two important words – *tiān* (天), which means “heaven,” and *zhú* (竹), which means “bamboo” but sounds similar to another *zhù* (祝) meaning “to wish” as in “birthday wishes.” To understand the meaning of a picture or floral arrangement that includes nandina, you must identify the other flowers and their symbolism and add the salutation “wishing you.” Nandina also symbolizes endurance as it never dies, valiantly surviving the various seasons.

## NARCISSUS

Narcissi (*Narcissus tazetta* var. *Chinensis*) are known by various names in Chinese, among them “water fairies” (*shuǐxiān* 水仙), “heavenly onions” (*yǎsuàn* 雅蒜), and “elegant in snow” (Figs. [41](#), [42](#)). Their most graceful name, *jīnzhǎn yíntái* (金盏银台), means “gold cup, silver base” and reflects the beauty of their colors. Narcissus bulbs, which bear four to eight small white flowers each, are forced open at the Chinese New Year to symbolize the arrival of spring, a good clue to identifying the season if you should spot a dish of flowering narcissi in a painting or picture. A special New Year arrangement that conveys wishes of good luck, longevity, and prosperity consists of narcissi, nandina, camellias, and the auspicious *língzhī* fungus. And because narcissi can be grown without soil in shallow containers of pebbles and water, they are associated with purity and a lack of corruption.

Narcissi are also associated with the Eight Immortals (see p. [176](#)) because *xiān* (仙) means “celestial beings, immortals.” A picture of a field with clumps of narcissi and a pine tree (representing longevity) is therefore expressing the desire for a long life, without aging.<sup>[69](#)</sup>

An arrangement consisting of a longevity stone, narcissus, and bamboo is a traditional birthday arrangement in Chinese floral art, the longevity stone (*shòushí* 寿石) representing longevity and the bamboo (*zhú* 竹) homophonous with the *zhù* (祝) that means “wish.”



Fig. 41 The narcissus is one of the most popular flowers of the Chinese New Year, symbolizing the arrival of spring. It frequently appears in New Year paintings, accompanied by prunus, nandina, camellias, sacred fungus, and other auspicious elements.



Fig. 42 A 5 *rénmínbì* note featuring Mao Zedong and a narcissus flower. This note also has a narcissus watermark.

A decorative motif found on both ceramics and textiles consisting of narcissi (*shuǐxiān* 水仙), *língzhī* (灵芝), and either real bamboo or Heavenly Bamboo (*tiānzhú* 天竹) has been interpreted as a complicated rebus that can be translated as “Immortal beings bestow birthday greetings” (*zhīxiānzhùshòu*, 芝仙祝寿) (Fig. 43).<sup>70</sup> A more literal translation is “[the] immortal beings wish [you] longevity.” The Chinese name for narcissi (*shuǐxiān*) means literally “water” (*shuǐ*), “fairies” or “immortal beings” (*xiān* 仙), giving us the Immortal Beings subject. (In fact, phonemes of both the *líng* of *língzhī* (fungus) and *xiān* of *shuǐxiān* mean “fairy” or “immortal being.”) The name for bamboo (*zhú* 竹) is a pun for “wish” (*zhù*



祝), giving us the verb. The idea of longevity is conveyed through the fungus of immortality, the *língzhī*. Sometimes peaches are added to embellish the longevity motif and message. A bonus is the knowledge that narcissus (*shuǐxiān*) rhymes with an expression that means “age, years” (*suìnián* 岁年).

A narcissus or narcissi are sometimes added to a picture or carving of prunus (flowering fruit tree blossoms) to represent the change of seasons from winter to early spring. If a chrysanthemum is also present, then the arrangement is known as the Three Hermits (narcissi, flowering plum blossoms, and chrysanthemums); for more on this, see PRUNUS p. [38](#).



Fig. 43 This badge, featuring a crane, would have been worn by the wife of a first-rank civil official, but note the peach tree and narcissus flowers on the left, symbolizing longevity, and the peonies, sacred fungus, and bamboo on the right. Together they form a rebus (*zhìxiānzhùshòu*) that reads “Immortal beings bestow birthday greetings.” Courtesy of Judith Rutherford.





Fig. 44 *Cymbidium*, the most common Chinese orchid, associated with elegance and sophistication.



Fig. 45 Four floral patterns adorn this small blue-and-white bowl, each representing one season of the year. These two sprays of *cymbidium* represent summer.



Fig. 46 Orchids, other auspicious flowers, and the special fungus of longevity (*lingzhi*) decorate this *zitan* brush pot. Courtesy of T'ang Horse Pte Ltd, Singapore.



Fig. 47 Yunnan's colorful tiger head orchids (*hǔ tóulán*).

## ORCHID

Orchids are collectively known in Chinese as *lán* (兰) or *lánhuā* (兰花), but also as *shānlán* (山兰), *yōulán* (幽兰), and *zhīlán* (芝兰) (Figs. 44-46). Many local varieties have names that reflect local mythology or icons such as Yunnan's beautiful *hǔtóulán* or tiger head orchid (虎头兰, Fig. 47). They are highly valued for their delicate fragrance and always associated with elegance. As a result, they are specifically associated with women, love, beauty, and fertility; and secondly, with virtue, moral excellence, and the “refinement of the superior man, whose reputation precedes him like perfume.”<sup>71</sup> The great sage Confucius wrote of the orchid: “The orchid originates in the deep valleys, but its obscurity does not discourage it from exuding its fragrance.”<sup>72</sup> He likened the orchid with his own situation – an orchid amongst wild grass being similar to that of a superior person (a learned and cultured gentleman) amongst the masses. “The association with a superior person is like entering a hall of orchids.”

Because of their association with refinement (literally “orchid heart” in Chinese, *lánxīn* 兰心), “orchid” was used as an adjective to describe items of refinement in pre-modern China. For example, a tastefully decorated room was “an orchid room” (*lánfáng* 兰房), elegant clothing was “orchid cloth” (*lánjīn* 兰巾), and good friends were “orchid friends” (*lánkè* 兰客).

Orchids are commonly used as an alternative symbol for the lotus to

represent the season “summer.” Their most common symbolism in art is when they are depicted together with irises in the combination known as *zhīlán* (芝兰) to symbolize noble character and true friendship.

When orchids are depicted flowering together with the fragrant sweet olive (*Osmanthus fragrans*), known in Chinese as *guì* (桂) or *guìhuā* (桂花) (see p. 40), the combination is known as *lán guì qífāng* (兰桂齐芳), which literally means “orchid and sweet olive fragrant together.”<sup>73</sup> This still life presents two valued flowers together, representing, as one Chinese author has written, the highly desired “son and nephew generation.”<sup>74</sup> Having both sons and nephews would certainly be regarded as “precious.”

## PEACH BLOSSOMS

The peach (*Prunus persica*) is discussed under fruit (p. 55) as the peach blossom figures considerably less in Chinese art than its fruit, which represents longevity. The one exception is Chinese New Year, also known as the Spring Festival, when special peach and other flowering fruit tree saplings are grown for the holiday. “The amount of blossom that opens in the house during the New Year celebrations determines the wealth the household is to acquire during the coming year,”<sup>75</sup> as peach blossoms symbolize good luck and happiness. A single peach blossom by itself, however, has the unfortunate connotation of symbolizing an early demise (because they bloom singly, well before the leaves, and often fall prematurely).<sup>76</sup>

## PEONY

Peonies are much loved by the Chinese for their bold size and colors (Fig. 48). They symbolize royalty, rank, wealth, and honor and are thus known as *fùguìhuā* (富贵花), the flower (*huā*) of wealth (*fù*) and rank (*guì*) or “riches and honor.” Sometimes the characters (*fùguì*) themselves accompany the floral paintings.

There are two main types of peony, those belonging to the herbaceous family (*Paeonia albiflora*, *sháoyao* 芍药 in Chinese), and those that belong to the xylophytic or woody family, also known as tree peonies (*Paeonia arborea*, *mǔdānhuā* 牡丹花 in Chinese). These latter plants bear large red flowers, earning the name “male vermilion flower.” As a result, they are known as the king of

flowers.



Fig. 48 A wealthy lady rests by special longevity stones in a garden graced by bamboo and peonies wearing a robe with the character *shòu*. The meaning is clear: a wish (the bamboo) for longevity (the gown and rocks) and rank (the peonies).





Fig. 49 A butterfly hovers above a peony on this embroidered silk earwarmer. The combination of butterflies and flowers is common, indicating conjugal fidelity.



Fig. 50 A Qing Dynasty scroll painted with pigments on silk depicting peonies in a wooden tub. 177 x 83 cm. Courtesy of Sotheby's.

The distinctive large pink and red ruffled *mǔdānhuā* blossoms are found as motifs on pottery, textiles, scrolls, and countless items of everyday Chinese life but most likely began their design life in stone as architectural decorations.<sup>[77](#)</sup>

“History records that the indigenous tree peony [*mǔdān* in Chinese] was introduced into the imperial gardens in the late sixth or early seventh century, during the short-lived Sui Dynasty (581–618),”<sup>78</sup> becoming popular during the Tang Dynasty when it became the favorite flower of the Emperor Gāozōng (高宗, r. 649–83) and his consort WǔZétiān (武则天, the infamous concubine who rose to be the only female emperor of China – the Empress Wu – who ruled from 685 to 705). It was the Empress Wǔ who gave them their name *mǔdān*. Their popularity continued well into the Song, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties.

Although peonies are associated with the *yáng* principle, they are also associated with female beauty and embody more than a hint of erotic lushness.

Peonies are often depicted with peacocks and lions, additional symbols of status and nobility.

When peonies are combined with lotus flowers (*lián* 莲), they symbolize glory and rank, power, and wealth interlinked,<sup>79</sup> the lotus contributing the concept of being linked or connected (*lián* 连). Peonies combined with peaches should be interpreted as “wealth and rank together with long life.” When combined with crab apple blossoms (*hǎitáng* 海棠), the combination expresses a wish that one’s home (*táng* is a homophone for the *táng* 堂 that means the main room in a home) will be honored [for example, enjoy rank, honor, etc.] (see Fig. 4). Peonies are also sometimes combined with crab apple blossoms and white magnolias (*yùlán*) for an especially auspicious combination, “a Jade Hall of wealth and honor” (*yùtáng fùguì* 玉堂富贵, see MAGNOLIA, p. 30.) The combination of a tree peony, *língzhī* fungus, bamboo, narcissi, and a peach tree or blossoms collectively form a rebus, which translates as “Divine spirits invoke longevity” (*xiānzhùshòu* 仙祝寿).<sup>80</sup> All of these plants are metaphors for longevity, but in addition bamboo (*zhú* 竹) sounds similar to another word, *zhù* (祝), meaning “to express good wishes/invoke” and the second half (*xiān* 仙) of the two-syllable expression for narcissus (*shuǐ xiān* 水仙), which means “divine spirits.”

The unusual combination of peonies in a wooden tub – there exists both a scroll and a glass snuff bottle from the Qiánlóng Period with this design, which makes us think there would have been more artifacts employing the convention)<sup>81</sup> – could be just a pleasantry balancing the phoneme *mu* (from peony, *mǔdān* 牡丹) with one of its morphemes that means wood (*mù* 木), but perhaps there is another meaning as well (Fig. 50). “A tubful” in Chinese is

*yìtǒng* (一桶) so it could be a wish for “a tubful of riches and honor.” Or could this be a pun using the *tóng* (同), which means “the same,” such that the depiction is a compliment (“wishing you the same rank and honor”)? Perhaps it is a combination of both sentiments.

The peony or tree peony (together with the orchid) represents spring, more specifically the third month in the Chinese lunar calendar, which falls in late March/ early April. Together, the lotus (summer), peony (spring), prunus (winter), and chrysanthemum (autumn) represent the four seasons of the year. This is an extremely popular and common design either by itself to mean “year round,” or coupled with other auspicious motifs to add additional meanings. For example, if the four representative flowers are in a vase (*píng* 并瓦), which has a homophone meaning “peaceful” (*píng* 平), the meaning becomes “year-round peace.”

## PINE

The evergreen qualities of pine and **cypress** came to represent long life and endurance in Chinese art and poetry, where the pine was regarded as one of the most revered of all plants (Fig. 53). Pine was, for example, the preferred dwarf plant to be used in *pénjǐng* (盆景), the beautiful miniature potted gardens known more commonly in the West by their Japanese name, bonsai. Pine (*sōng* 松) has no homophone, but cyprus (*bái* 柏) has the important homophone that means “100” (*bǎi* 百), so it is important to be able to recognize the difference. Be especially mindful if a picture depicts a cyprus shading a hillside or landscape. If another auspicious creature is also shown, for example bees or a monkey or crane, it is probably a rebus meaning “100 Blessings,” as the expression *yìnbì* (荫蔽) “be shaded” sounds like *yìnbì* (荫庇) “to bless.” The cyprus adds the concept of “100.”

Pine and cypress together represent the felicitous thought “as long a life as the pine and the cypress” (*sōng bǎi cháng shòu* 松柏长寿) in which *sōng* (松) is pine and *bǎi* (柏) is cypress, *cháng* (长) is “long” and *shòu* (寿) is “longevity.” Cranes, which the Chinese believe live for centuries, also represent longevity, and thus are often depicted with pines (see Fig. 125 and CRANE p. 69).

A pine tree towering over a mossy rock is another combination wishing one a long life, the mossy (*tái* 苔) rock playing on the *tài* (太) that is used in such

expressions as *tàigōng* (太公, great-grandfather) to mean “senior.” As such, it plays the same role as a longevity stone (see ROCKS AND STONES p. 64).

The stylized combination of pines, bamboo, and plum blossoms (prunus)<sup>82</sup> represented the scholar ideal, and form an artistic grouping that was highly regarded by the Confucians; it was known as the Three Friends of Winter (*suihán sānyǒu* 岁寒三友, Fig. 52) as all three plants can be found in the early spring when the evergreen pine and bamboo are joined by the early spring-flowering prunus. This grouping, which first appeared in a ninth-century poem by Zhū Qìngyú (朱庆余), was made popular in part through the work of the Song artist Zhào Mèngjiān (赵孟坚, 1199–1256/64), by which time the trio was closely associated with the Confucian ideal.<sup>83</sup> This motif has been executed in nearly every material possible and may be difficult to identify at first. Look first for the distinctive bamboo leaves, then see if you can spot the five-petaled flowering plum blossoms of the prunus, plus the distinctive sprays of pine needles (Fig. 51).<sup>84</sup>

The popularity of this trio has even inspired Chinese artists to portray the grouping using other flowers and greenery as artistic proxies. Such an example is a painting shown in an exhibition in San Francisco (1985) entitled *The Hundred Flowers: Botanical Motifs in Chinese Art*. Chinese symbolism expert Terese Tse Bartholomew has helped interpret this painting, which bears the inscription *xiàn dān méi shòu* (仙丹眉寿, “elixir of life and long eyebrows”), as both a longevity rebus as well as a proxy for the Three Friends. The painting depicts nandina or Heavenly Bamboo (*tiānzhú* 天竹), wintersweet (*làméi* 腊梅), and the Luóhàn pine (*luóhàn sōng* 罗汉松).<sup>85</sup>





Fig. 51 Close-up of a brooch reproducing an intricate woodcut of the Three Friends of Winter (pine, prunus, and bamboo).



Fig. 52 *Famille noire* dish with the Three Friends of Winter motif. Jingdezhen, China. Qing Dynasty, Guangxu Period. Ceramic. Diam. 28 cm. © Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

Examine these three plants' names carefully and you can extract the names of the original Three Friends of pine (*sōng* 松), bamboo (*zhú* 竹), and blossoming plum/ prunus (*méi* 梅).



Fig. 53 A spray of Heavenly Bamboo (nandina) with its characteristic red berries, accompanies the peaches and apricots (?) in this auspicious painting, adding a wish for longevity to the scene. Note the

dark lines of *wáng* (王) on the tiger's forehead, marking his power as a king of beasts. Detail of a painting. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

## PLANTAIN

See banana p. [22](#).



Fig. 54 The ubiquitous prunus, symbolizing early spring, beauty, and the transitoriness of life.



Fig. 55 “Prunus” is the botanical name for a large group of deciduous and evergreen trees and shrubs known for their beautiful spring blossoms.



Fig. 56 Young prunus trees in Beijing's Forbidden City.

## PRUNUS

There is so much confusion over flowering fruit trees discussed in Western texts that here they have been grouped under the name most often used for them – prunus (Fig. 56). This includes, for example, *Prunus armeniaca* (apricot), *Prunus mume* Sieb. et Zucc (Japanese apricot), *Prunus persica* (peach), *Prunus davidiana* (ancestor/wild peach), *Prunus salicina* Lindl. (Japanese plum), and *Prunus pseudocerasus* (Chinese cherry).<sup>86</sup> (The flowering apricot, *Prunus armeniaca*, *prunus mume* is commonly but erroneously also sometimes referred to as a plum but, in fact, is not a true plum but a member of the apricot family and, without doubt, the most popular of all garden flowers in China.)<sup>87</sup> All of these plants are members of the *Rosaceae* family, as is the Chinese quince. But the plant that most people refer to has no precise English name other than the misleading **flowering plum** (*méi* 梅 or *méihuā* 梅花), a member of *Prunus mume*. This tree can grow to a remarkable age, and “unlike the peach it is long-lived, and specimens claimed to be up to 1000 years old are found in gardens and the grounds of temples.”<sup>88</sup>

Most of these flowers are easily identified in Chinese art by their distinctive red, pink, or white flowers with five rounded or lightly heart-shaped petals (Fig. 54). In classical China, manuals existed teaching artists exactly how such blossoms were to be portrayed – as buds, when first opening, when opened, when fading, etc. Highly admired for their beauty, they are regarded as “first among flowers.”<sup>89</sup> The five petals are suggestive of the Five Happinesses (see FIVE p. 226).

The flowering plum holds a special place, however, in Chinese literature and art (Fig. 55). Because the plum is the first of the fruit trees to bloom in late

winter/ early spring (beating even the famous cherry blossoms), with its buds and tender petals emerging on bare limbs before the first leaves appear, it is associated with the end of winter and the dawning of spring, and therefore endurance and hope (Fig. 56). Because it also buds, blossoms, and its petals fall so shortly thereafter, it is also associated with beauty, purity, and the transitoriness of life, “a spirit of tender ambivalence, embracing pleasure and regret.”<sup>90</sup>

“Until the Song dynasty, the plum blossom was no more than an occasional literary motif, one among many beautiful and resonant floral images,”<sup>91</sup> but then something happened. Song poets discovered the flowering plum and after it became a popular motif with them, the artists moved in. For decades, the simple beauty of a flowering or budding plum branch fascinated the Chinese upper classes, but being the object of so much attention proved to be too much for the simple little plum blossom, and as the poets dashed off their verses and the artists their scrolls, China produced such a mountain of plum-inspired material that one scholar-author threw “up his hands in disgust and list[ed] bad poetry and flowering plum clichés among his ‘Abominations to the Blossoms’.”<sup>92</sup> Today, the flowering plum is still one of the most common designs found on any surface worthy of decoration in China. I have even seen plum blossom-decorated ashtrays.

Their associations became many – with beautiful women, with hermit recluses, with widows mourning the passing of youth and beauty, as a scholar’s delight (paintings of this era are typically entitled “Scholars Conversing beneath Flowering Plum”),<sup>93</sup> but the prevailing image is that of the pleasures in searching for or discovering a budding tree, discovering a field of trees in bloom, magpies sweeping in over a flowering plum tree, etc.

Jenyns writes that a particularly popular New Year greeting during the reign of the Emperor Kāngxī (康熙) was a vase depicting plum blossoms with a crackle glaze.<sup>94</sup> This was to represent the cracking of winter ice with the first sign of spring. A famous poet of the Tang Dynasty was said to have ridden out on a donkey into the snow to seek spring’s first plum blossoms, hence the theme of a popular painting that depicts the search for poetic inspiration. *Prunus mume* branches are still force-flowered at Chinese New Year to ensure the blossoms’ presence as one of the most popular symbols of spring, and they remain popular miniature garden (*pénjǐng* 盆景) plants.

The association of happiness at the coming of spring with the flowering plum



has resulted in plum blossoms, together with the magpie (*xǐque* 喜鹊), becoming a popular coupling symbolizing joy. When a plum tree and a magpie, the harbinger of good fortune, are depicted together, the message can mean either “arrival of happiness” or “happiness up to one’s eyebrows” (to determine which, and why, see MAGPIE p. 77).

We also know that as late as the 1960s the old custom of drawing a branch with nine flowers with a total of eighty-one petals was practiced at the time of the winter solstice. “Each day a petal would be marked so that, by the time the chart was completed, the nine nines of days would be past and spring would be well advanced.”<sup>95</sup>



Fig. 57 A rootwood seal paste box carved by Chen Chongben in 1778 showing a textured surface of knots and nodes. Qianlong Period. Courtesy Sotheby's.

Apple (*píngguǒ* 苹果) blossoms in a vase (*píng* 并瓦) is a double pun meaning “peace” as both apple and vase are homophones of the word that means peace (*héping* 和平).

Plum and peach blossoms painted together symbolize friendship and one scholar tells us that the combination also “denotes students.”<sup>96</sup>

A very special grouping consisting of flowering plum, chrysanthemum, and narcissus refers to a group known as the Three Hermits, made famous in an ink and color on silk scroll dated 1651 by Chén Hóngshòu (陈洪绶).<sup>97</sup> In this scroll, each of the flowers is an allusion to a famous recluse of the past: the flowering plum refers to the early Song poet Lín Bū (林逋), who loved the flowering plum (prunus), the chrysanthemum to the Six Dynasties poet Táo Qián (陶潜),<sup>98</sup> and the narcissus to the Late Song scholar-painter Zhào Mèngjiān (赵孟坚), who specialized in painting them.<sup>99</sup> At least one porcelain piece contains this famous grouping as a decoration. There is a jar dating to the Emperor Wànlì's reign (万历, 1573–1620) depicting four scholars, each in a garden with his favorite flower: Táo Qián with his chrysanthemum, Lín Bū with his flowering plum, the Neo-

confucianist philosopher Zhōu Dūnyí (周敦颐, 1017–73) overlooking lotus blossoms in a pool, and Huáng Tíngjiān (黃庭堅, 1045–1105), a famous poet and calligrapher, who strove to have the orchid recognized as China's national flower, with an orchid.<sup>[100](#)</sup>



Fig. 58 A snuff bottle made from a root.

## QUINCE

The perennial Chinese quince (*Chaenomeles sinensis*, *Cydonia sinensis* or, more correctly, *Pseudocydonia sinensis*) is not a true quince, but a species of pear.<sup>[101](#)</sup> Its Chinese name is *mùguā* (木瓜) but it is also known as *mùlǐ* (木李) and *hǎitáng* (海棠).<sup>[102](#)</sup> Chinese quinces are much loved by bonsai growers because of their tiny bright pink flowers that appear (similar to prunus flowers) before the leaves appear, as one of the first flowers to bloom at the end of winter. They can bloom for long periods, and are also identifiable by their prickly thorns. (A miniature tree in a painting bearing five-petalled flowers is typically the Chinese quince.) Because of their ability to bloom as winter is ending, the flower represents fortitude and endurance, hope and rejuvenation. The five petals also associate it with the Five Blessings (*wǔfú* 五福) (see FIVE p. [226](#)).

## REEDS

Reeds (*lú* 芦) in a painting may be a veiled reference to imperial China's civil service examination system and a candidate's success in it, especially if ducks are present (for the reason, see DUCK p. 71). If the painting or scroll's subject features fish swimming in reeds, the subject of the painting is the fish and the reeds are present for aesthetic reasons only since the Chinese believed that fish should always be portrayed in "natural surroundings so as to capture the natural essence of the fish."<sup>103</sup> See FISH p. 96.



Fig. 59 Although known in Chinese art as the Sacred or Japanese lily, this plant's Chinese name *wànniánqīng* signals its symbolic meaning. When it appears in a floral arrangement or painting, it adds the sentiment "10,000-fold."

## ROOTS

Roots fascinate the Chinese and are symbolic not only of the vital forces of nature, which they clearly represent, but also longevity (Fig. 58). In much of Chinese art, you will come across roots not only as important elements of landscape compositions, but also as a basic material (root nodules, in particular) from which other objects are carved. Sometimes a root nodule was carved to form a small box, such as the seal paste box carved by the famous scholar, calligrapher, and carver Chén Chóngběn (陈崇本) in 1778 (Fig. 57).<sup>104</sup> The EIGHT IMMORTALS were particularly popular subjects for root carvers (see p. 176).

## SACRED OR JAPANESE LILY

There is an evergreen plant commonly found in Chinese art known in English as the Sacred or Japanese lily although it bears little relationship to real lilies (Fig. [59](#)).<sup>105</sup> A great number of leaf varieties exist, but you can identify it by its long, narrow, thick, smooth, glossy green leaves, often edged or streaked with white, with stalks of brilliant red berries that appear in the autumn and last through the winter. It is a low-growing plant that forms in clumps. The Chinese use it as a pot plant. Its Latin name is *Rohdea japonica* and its Chinese name is *wànniánqīng* (万年青) where *wàn* (万) means “10,000.” The presence of this plant in a floral arrangement intensifies the main message (generally a birthday or other special occasion greeting) “10,000-fold,” although the plant most commonly used today is the philodendron.

One common grouping is *Rohdea japonica* with a real lily (*bǎihé* 百合). This combination (*hé hé wàn nián* (合禾) is a pun on *hé hé wàn nián* (万年) or “10,000 years of harmony and union” where one of the two *hé*’s (合) in “lily” becomes a proxy for the *hé* (和) that means both “harmony” and “union.”

When *Rohdea japonica* is paired with the auspicious *língzhī* fungus, the meaning becomes “10,000-fold, according to your wishes.”

## SWEET FLAG

See CALAMUS p. [23](#).

## SWEET OLIVE

Recognizable by its very tiny sweet-scented white blossoms, the sweet olive or *Osmanthus fragrans* is known by Chinese botanists as *mùxī* (木樨) but more colloquially as *guì* (桂) or *guìhuā* (桂花), the same *guì* found in the name of cassia (see p. [24](#)), giving it a homophonous relationship with the *guì* (贵) that means “of high rank, noble.” For this reason, these two plants are sometimes used interchangeably in English texts. Both are associated with the same stories and symbolism, for example, associations with the moon and academic success. While both are evergreens, the sweet olive is a shrub or small tree that grows 5–12 meters tall while the cassia is a tree that more typically is 10–15 meters. The



sweet olive has very tiny white, creamy, or yellow tubular flowers that grow in small clusters like little firework displays, whereas cassia blossoms hang in long pendular groups from the tree. Both plants are indigenous to China and both are fragrant (the bark of the cassia tree or bush is very sweet smelling, as are sweet olive blossoms), which could be why both are found in auspicious paintings and drawings, especially scenes of 100 Children.[106](#)

The town of Guilin (桂林) means literally “forest of osmanthus trees,” which is an apt description of this beautiful town on the Li River with its thousands of osmanthus trees. Hangzhou, too, has been identified as the hometown of the osmanthus, and its famous West Lake is reputed to be one of China’s “top five osmanthus viewing locations.”

## VINE

While a tendrilled vine or trailing plant (*wàn* or *màn* 蔓) is not the name of a specific plant but rather describes the manner in which a plant grows, it plays such an important role in Chinese decorative design that it merits its own entry. The [grape]vine (see Fig. [94](#)) was most likely a decorative motif borrowed from West Asia, in all probability in the fourth to third century BCE. Over time, however, vines acquired a specific symbolic significance in China, which was probably related to the two pronunciations of their name. *Wàn* could be a homophone of the word that means “10,000” (*wàn* 万). A tendrilled vine thus could be understood to intensify the symbolism of the flowers or fruit or whatever they were wrapped around, “10,000-fold” (which is not to be taken literally, but only to mean “myriad”). *Màn* could be a homophone of the word that means “completely, entirely, very” (*mǎn* 满). A vine is also a “continuous, unbroken” (*mián* 绵) growth, so combining both meanings, the addition of a vine to a design adds the understanding of “completely and continuously” to the original symbol, be it gourds for fecundity (see Fig. [84](#)) or peaches for longevity.

## WILLOW

The willow (*liǔ* 柳) is one of the most familiar trees in Chinese art in the West thanks to the popular blue-and-white “willow tree” export china pattern, which is actually not Chinese at all but the romantic product of England’s famous

Spode ceramics factory (Fig. 60).<sup>107</sup> The familiar scene depicts the garden of a rich mandarin, with a central willow tree, river, and fruit trees. The tale behind the scene is supposed to be of a daughter eloping with her father's clerk, with whom she has fallen in love. The lovers try to flee, but discovered by her father are fortuitously turned into doves able to fly beyond his reach. Sometimes the design depicts the three central characters, sometimes two birds and the father, sometimes only the birds. A pagoda on an island with a boat moored nearby may also figure in the scene.

The willow has always been associated with scholars and poets, who would amble along the rivers and lakes where this tree grows, seeking inspiration. The garden of the famous pre-Tang Dynasty poet Táo Yuānmíng (陶淵明, CE 365–427) contained five willows, which featured not only in his poetry but also in artistic representations of the idyllic, retired life (see p. 166).

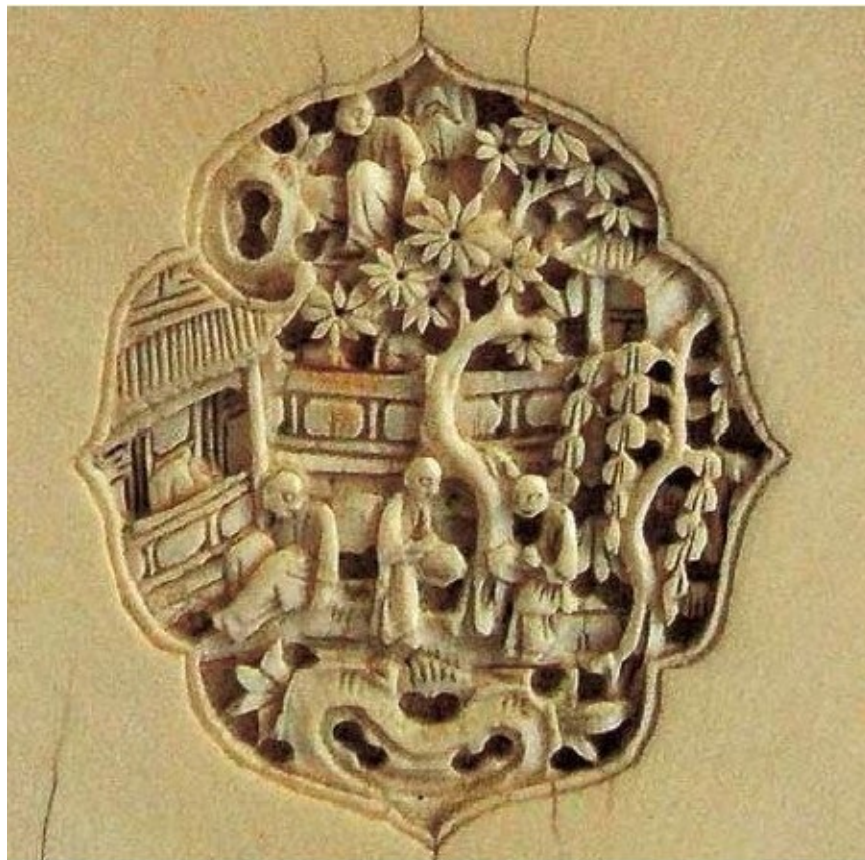


Fig. 60 An ivory card case with garden scenes featuring weeping willow trees, associated with scholars and poets.

To the Chinese, the willow also symbolizes vitality and strength and was believed to possess such magic powers that it was even used in exorcisms.<sup>108</sup> The willow was used “to brush off the ancestral tombs at the Qīngmíng Festival [清明节] in springtime,” and sprigs and branches are sometimes hung over doorways of homes to protect them at this time of the year.<sup>109</sup>

The Chinese Buddhist goddess Guānyīn (see p. 201) is credited with using willow branches to sprinkle the nectar of life on the sick and dying, and thus became an important symbol of Buddhism (Fig. 61). Highly regarded for its resilience, the “weeping willow” is also attributed with symbolizing “the compassionate concern for the ills of this world ... in the Mahayana teachings of Buddhism.”<sup>110</sup> It is also said that in the past the branches “were picked from trees and presented to friends about to leave for distant lands to signify close friendship,”<sup>111</sup> but I suspect, given their protective powers, that they were in effect a way of saying “have a safe trip.”

The willow is also associated with summer and is frequently depicted with swallows or orioles as a seasonal grouping.

Pussy willows feature in New Year art as the many buds on a single branch represent the promise of prosperity.



Fig. 61 Detail from a scroll of Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, holding a willow sprig which she uses to annoint the sick and dying with the nectar of life. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

## WINTERSWEET

Wintersweet (*là méi* 腊梅) is an ornamental bush or small tree that bears light yellow, waxy, fragrant flowers in the winter. It originated in China and its

botanical name is *Chimonantus praecox*. To many Chinese, it is the first real flower to bloom in the snowy winter. It is sometimes called simply *mèi*, which confuses it with plum blossoms, which also bloom as winter ends. *Là* is the Chinese name of the twelfth month of the year, with which it is associated. Wintersweet is often used instead of *Prunus mume* in the Three Friends of Winter grouping (see p. [37](#)). Both are strongly associated with the auspiciousness of the Chinese New Year.

## WISTERIA

Paintings of wisteria (*Wisteria sinensis*, known in Chinese as *zǐténg* or “purple vine” 紫藤), are rare, although there is a “painting of about 1530 of a wisteria climbing over a dead tree ... then from the 17th century on it has been depicted more frequently (Fig. [62](#)). According to Bartholemew it was a popular subject with certain 20th century artists, who took delight in using their calligraphic skills to depict the twining branches.”<sup>[112](#)</sup> Wisteria flowers are found as both ceramic and textile designs and were said to be a favorite of the last Empress Dowager, the Empress Cíxǐ (慈禧太后, 1834–1908), but seem to have no special symbolic role other than, perhaps, their color, as purple was one of the colors associated with the emperor and the imperial family (Fig. [63](#)).

As can be seen, many flowers and plants are grouped into **floral arrangements** conveying messages or sentiments derived from the combination of the individual components. To understand their meaning, look up the individual flowers in the previous pages.

One final word: if you are having difficulty identifying a flower because it seems to be wholly unrealistic, you could be looking at an imaginary composite flower that was very popular during the Sui and Tang Dynasties, which was meant to represent “majesty and beauty” (Fig. [64](#)). Known as the *bǎoxiānghuā* (宝相花) or *bǎobǎo* (宝宝), this purely decorative flower combines the attributes of the peony, lotus, chrysanthemum, pomegranate, and other diverse flowers. It is sometimes referred to as “peony scrolls” or a “rosette pattern.”<sup>[113](#)</sup> It has also been translated as “Buddha’s rose.”





Fig. 62 Detail of wisteria from a porcelain flower vase.



Fig. 63 Wisteria, known in Chinese as “purple vine” (*zǐténg*).



Fig. 64 Close-up of a mythical flower known as the *bǎoxiānghuā*, with tendrils and vines. This flower is also sometimes known as “Buddha’s rose.”

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Flowers play such a significant role in Chinese culture that many foreigners over the years (e.g. Carl Crow, *Foreign Devils in the Flowery Kingdom*, New York: Harper, 1940; Chester Stratton, *Picturesque China or the Flowery Kingdom*, Washington, 1910; and even C. A. S. Williams in the introduction to his famous *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1932, amongst others) have even referred to China as the “Flowery Kingdom,” perhaps misunderstanding the *huá* (华) that means “China” for the *huā* (花) that means “flower.” The China *huá* (华) means “magnificent, splendid.” This is the same *huá* one finds in the Xinhua news agency’s name. Some believe that this latter *huá* evolved from the flower *huā*. ([www.chinastyle.cn/essential/name-of-china](http://www.chinastyle.cn/essential/name-of-china))
- <sup>2</sup> Werner Speiser, *The Art of China: Spirit and Society*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1966, pp. [42–3](#).
- <sup>3</sup> H. L. Li, *Chinese Flower Arrangement*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Hedera House, 1956, p. [32](#).
- <sup>4</sup> For a full discussion of the entry of foliage decorations (lotus and peony scrolls) in China, see Jessica Rawson, *Chinese Ornament: The Lotus and the Dragon*, London: British Museum Publications, 1984, Ch. 2. Speiser (*The Art of China*, p. [124](#)) credits the grapevine and lotus spreading from Persia to the East during the Han, followed by jasmine, narcissus, pomegranate, almond, fig, olive, and watermelon. “In the 6th century the old favourites of the west, tendrils, palmettes and half-palmettes, and flower-medallions were introduced; with them many Persian decorative motifs such as bands of pearls, framed medallions, peacocks and winged horses....”
- <sup>5</sup> H. L. Li, *Chinese Flower Arrangement*, p. [15](#).
- <sup>6</sup> Rawson, *Chinese Ornament*, pp. [35–62](#), also notes that the “leaf/vine design first appeared in China in the 4th Century BCE from West Asia.”
- <sup>7</sup> The Chinese believe that every home should have a garden, even if only a few potted plants or miniature garden (the Chinese miniature garden served as the model for Japanese landscape miniatures). This tradition lives on even in such urban sprawls as Hong Kong where virtually every fire escape and balcony has at least a few potted plants in a bid to fulfill this ideal.
- <sup>8</sup> The Eastern Sea (somewhere off the eastern coast of northern China) was traditionally the site of the Daoist Isles of the Immortals, and a source of wealth, combining the two wishes for wealth and longevity. In contrast, the Western Paradise was believed to be in the mountains of Central Asia.
- <sup>9</sup> The symbol of mountains and seas is so commonly understood in Chinese thought that it has found its way into a number of verbal and literary expressions as well. For example, *wànshuǐ qiānshān* (万水千山), “10,000 torrents and 1,000 mountains,” translates into the “trials of a long journey.”
- <sup>10</sup> [www.schooloftheseasons.com/flowers/](http://www.schooloftheseasons.com/flowers/)
- <sup>11</sup> Flowers are so strongly associated with seasons in Chinese thought that the expression “Chrysanthemums in autumn and peaches in spring” is understood by all as “everything in its due

season.” Each month also has its own appropriate flower.

- [12](#) Wang Yao-t'ing (trans. Stone Studio), *Looking at Chinese Painting: A Comprehensive Guide to the Philosophy, Technique and History of Chinese Painting*, Tokyo: Nigensha Publishing, 1996, p. [59](#). In answer to the question, “Why landscape?” Guō Xī responded: “A virtuous man takes delight in landscapes so that in a rustic retreat he may nourish his nature, amid the carefree play of streams and rocks, he may take delight, that he might constantly meet in the country fishermen, wood-cutters, and hermits, and see the soaring of cranes and hear the crying of monkeys. The din of the dusty world and the locked-in-ness of human habitations are what human nature habitually abhors; on the contrary, haze, mist, and the haunting spirits of the mountains are what the human nature seeks, and yet can rarely find.”
- [13](#) Groupings of flowers and birds are one of the “six principles” of Chinese art (the others are fast and slow strokes, thick and thin lines, painted areas and empty space, light and dark, old and new techniques). Some of China’s most famous traditional painters, such as the Northern Song artist Zháo Chāng (赵昌, 1464–1526), are known principally for their bird and flower paintings. Bird and flower motifs were especially popular motifs amongst the painters of the Chan Buddhist school of painting (better known by its later Japanese outgrowth, Zen, introduced to Japan from China in the twelfth century) during the Song Dynasty. According to Wang Yao-t'ing (*Looking at Chinese Painting*, p. [137](#)), flower, bird, and animal became popular subjects during the Tang Dynasty “after the minister Hsüeh Chi earned fame for his paintings of cranes” in the early Tang. The popularity of bird and flower paintings led to their appearance on ceramics and textiles.
- [14](#) The pairing of swallows and apricot blossoms is a special reference to success in one’s examinations. See swallow p. [88](#).
- [15](#) Soame Jenyns, *A Background to Chinese Painting*, New York: Schocken Books, 1966, p. [14](#).
- [16](#) Zhou Xun and Gao Chunming, *5000 Years of Chinese Costumes*, Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1984, p. [107](#).
- [17](#) Ibid.
- [18](#) Painted by the Jesuit priest Giuseppe Castiglione approximately 1736.
- [19](#) Any of a genus of composite herbs and shrubs with strong-smelling foliage. Its name is derived from its association with the Greek goddess Artemis, the daughter of Zeus. Mugwort has received renewed interest since its appearance in the *Harry Potter* books. “
- [20](#) *Zhuózhòngzhì* [酌中志, a book written during the Ming Dynasty by a court eunuch] describes the badge worn during the Dragon Boat Festival and summer solstice to be adorned with tigers, the Five Poisons, artemisia and calamus.” See Wong Hwei Lian and Szan Tan (eds.), *Power Dressing: Textiles for Rulers and Priests from the Chris Hall Collection*, exhibition catalogue, Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2006, p. [269](#).
- [21](#) Bamboo shoots are eaten as a vegetable; the young unopened leaves are boiled for tea; and the pulpy center is used as a medicine to clear congested lungs. Furthermore, bamboo is used in the making of furniture, brushpots, construction scaffolding, pipes, baskets, toys, decorative items, fishing poles, and, of course, chopsticks, to name just the obvious.
- [22](#) “I can go without meat in my meal, yet I can’t live in a place without bamboo.” This poet is also known as Sū Shì (蘇拭, 1036–1101). He is the author of the famous poem celebrating the pleasures of food and wine with friends in the countryside, known as “Rhapsody on Red Cliff” (*Chì bì fù* 赤壁賦). It was so

popular that it is found on many a Late Ming bowl. Accompanying pictures usually depict happy picnic parties. The Red Cliffs were located on the Yangzi River near the poet's home in Hangzhou. Two bowls with this design can be seen in the Topkapi Saray Collection, Istanbul. Another can be seen in the Art Institute of Chicago.

- [23](#) Peter Valder, *The Garden Plants of China*, Rozelle, New South Wales: Florilegium, 1999, p. 310.
- [24](#) Ibid., p. [190](#).
- [25](#) Ibid., p. [228](#).
- [26](#) Ibid.
- [27](#) Kathleen Ryor, "Nature Contained: Penjing and Flower Arrangements as Surrogate Gardens in Ming China," *Orientalia*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2002, p. [70](#).
- [28](#) Ibid., p. [72](#).
- [29](#) There are more than 260 species of camellia. Their name honors the German Jesuit missionary Georg Kamel, who died in Manila in 1706, one of the great early botanists to work on oriental plants. At one time, camellias were referred to as *Thea chinensis*. It is difficult to believe today that tea was unknown in the West until the seventeenth century. We are told that "it was first officially imported from Asia to Europe for the first time in 1610." Shirley Maloney Mueller, "17th Century Chinese Export Teapots: Imagination and Diversity," *Orientalia*, Vol. 36, No. 7, 2005, p. [59](#).
- [30](#) H. L. Li, *Chinese Flower Arrangement*, p. [26](#).
- [31](#) Yǒngzhèng (1723–35) was the father of the famous Qiánlóng Emperor (1736–95).
- [32](#) There are two main varieties of cinnamon, which comes from the inner bark of the tree: *Cinnamomum cassia* and *Cinnamomum zeylanicum*. This latter is considered "true cinnamon" and is slightly lighter in color and sweeter than cassia. True cinnamon can be recognized by its one directional roll; cassia is rolled from both ends making a tight little scroll-like roll.
- [33](#) Scott Minick and Jiao Ping, *Arts and Crafts of China*, Singapore: Thames & Hudson, 1996, p. [37](#).
- [34](#) John W. Caffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Song China*, new edn, New York: State University of New York Press, 1995, p. [157](#).
- [35](#) The strongly aromatic cassia bark forms the familiar spice that is still used in Chinese herbal medicine to treat diarrhoea. See John D. Keys, *Chinese Herbs: Their Botany, Chemistry, and Pharmacodynamics*, Hong Kong: Swindon Book Company, 1976, p. [111](#).
- [36](#) Wang Jiayi and Ma Yue (trans. Deng Xin), *China's Rare Flowers: Painted in Traditional Chinese Style by Wu Guoting*, Beijing: Morning Glory Press, 1995, p. [6](#).
- [37](#) Jean Mailey, *Embroidery of Imperial China*, New York: China House Gallery and China Institute in America, 1978, p. [32](#). Rank badges exist which must have been used during the Ming Dynasty's Chrysanthemum Festival because they incorporate chrysanthemums in their design, much as rank badges worn during the Moon Festival incorporate hares and the moon.
- [38](#) Li Zuding (chief ed.), *Chinese Traditional Auspicious Patterns*, PRC: Shanghai Popular Science Press, 1989, p. [29](#).



- [39](#) The flowers of wild chrysanthemums, readers may be surprised to learn, are very small. It is only the cultivated varieties that feature the large blossoms associated with chrysanthemums today.
- [40](#) Speiser, *The Art of China*, p. [109](#).
- [41](#) George N. Kates, *The Years that were Fat: Peking 1933–1940*, New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1952, p. [23](#).
- [42](#) Sotheby's, *Emperor and Scholar*, auction catalogue, Hong Kong, April 25, 2004, item #60 offered a very rare imitation lacquer chrysanthemum-shaped seal paste box with cover bearing a Qiánlóng reign mark.
- [43](#) [www.wellesley.edu/Activities/homepage/web/Species/pdaylily.html](http://www.wellesley.edu/Activities/homepage/web/Species/pdaylily.html). Water chestnuts in Chinese are *líng* (菱).
- [44](#) Robin Lane Fox, "Palaces, Politics and Plants," *Financial Times*, March 11/12, 2006, p. W19.
- [45](#) Li Zuding, *Chinese Traditional Auspicious Patterns*, p. [68](#).
- [46](#) Teresa Tse Bartholomew, *The Hundred Flowers: Botanical Motifs in Chinese Art*, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1985, as quoted in Valder, *The Garden Plants of China*, p. 361.
- [47](#) Ye Yingsui, Ye Shuqin, and Ye Dui, *Auspicious Designs of China*, Beijing: China Travel & Tourism Press, 2002, p. [57](#).
- [48](#) "Before the introduction of Buddhism, floral motifs were almost entirely absent from the Chinese design repertoire." Exhibition note T.M. R56.1.1 by a carpet fragment from China (Xinjiang, Khotan), 18-19C from the Textile Museum, Washington DC, October 2004.
- [49](#) For example, Xiangtangshan, Yungang, and Dunhuang.
- [50](#) Rawson, *Chinese Ornament*, p. [125](#).
- [51](#) Right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Mao later made use of this framework in drafting the Four Big Rights of the Cultural Revolution during the mid-1960s. These were speaking out freely, airing views fully, holding great debates, and writing big character posters, all of which became important weapons in encouraging Mao's youthful followers to criticize his intra-party rivals. They were incorporated into the state constitution in 1975.
- [52](#) The word for vase is *píngzi* (瓶子) and for lotus is *héhuā* (荷花), which, when combined, forms the word for "peace" (*héping* 和平), an especially relevant association for a Goddess of Mercy.
- [53](#) *Huā* (花) simply means "flower."
- [54](#) A beautiful example can be seen in the Victoria & Albert Museum's textile collection in London.
- [55](#) Raymond Li, *A Glossary of Chinese Snuff Bottle Rebus: Re-discovering the Hidden Internal Beauty in Snuff Bottles*, Hong Kong: Nine Dragons, 1976, p. [36](#).
- [56](#) All of these birds symbolize government employees as well as the income obtained through the holding of an official position.
- [57](#) Although pronounced with different tones: the "official" *guān* is first tone, whereas "stork" has a falling fourth tone (*guàn*).

- <sup>58</sup> The practice of binding feet by upper-class Chinese women was abolished by imperial decree in 1902, but was still seen well into the 1930s and even the 1940s.
- <sup>59</sup> Howard Levy, *Chinese Footbinding: The History of a Curious Erotic Custom*, New York: Bell Publishing, 1947, p. <sup>39</sup>. Fǎxiǎn was one of the famous early monks of Chinese Buddhism. At the age of sixty-two, in search of Buddhist texts and teachings, he left Xian (then known as Ch'ang-an) on a historic eleven-year pilgrimage, visiting more than thirty kingdoms before returning to China to write the classic *Fǎxiǎn's Pilgrimage to India*.
- <sup>60</sup> Wang Qingzheng (trans. Lillian Chin and Jay Xu), *A Dictionary of Chinese Ceramics*, Singapore: Sun Tree Publishing, 2002, p. <sup>51</sup>.
- <sup>61</sup> 段建华 [Duàn Jiànhuá], 中国吉祥装饰设计, *Chinese Auspicious Decoration Design*, 北京: 中国轻工业出版社, May 1, 1999, pp. <sup>35</sup>, <sup>66</sup>.
- <sup>62</sup> A name that will be known to all lovers of Walt Disney cinema from the *Adventures of Mulan*, the famous daughter of a general who serves her country in her father's place.
- <sup>63</sup> Beverly Jackson and David Hugus, *Ladder to the Clouds: Intrigue and Tradition in Chinese Rank*, Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 1999, p. <sup>208</sup>.
- <sup>64</sup> Teresa Tse Barthomew, "Botanical Puns in Chinese Art from the Collection of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco," *Orientalizations*, Vol. 16, No. 9, 1985, pp. <sup>23-4</sup>.
- <sup>65</sup> Translated as "The Lament," "Encountering Sorrow," or "Sorrow in Estrangement," this poem is considered one of the greatest in Chinese poetry.
- <sup>66</sup> Allen Haaheim, "'Rhapsody on Observing the Water-clock' by Pao Chao (d. 466)," <http://www.ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v08n01/poet/translations/haaheimnotes.html>.
- <sup>67</sup> Li Zuding, *Chinese Traditional Auspicious Patterns*, pp. <sup>150-1</sup>.
- <sup>68</sup> Schuyler Cammann, *China's Dragon Robes*, New York: Ronald Press, 1952, p. <sup>98</sup>.
- <sup>69</sup> Ye, Ye, and Ye, *Auspicious Designs of China*, p. <sup>53</sup>.
- <sup>70</sup> Attributed to Teresa Tse Bartholomew in Sotheby's, *100 Selected Chinese and Korean Ceramics from the Toguri Collection*, auction catalogue, London, June 9, 2004, p. <sup>14</sup>.
- <sup>71</sup> Roberta Helmer Stalberg and Ruth Nesi, *China's Crafts: The Story of How They're Made and What They Mean*, New York: Eurasia Press, 1980, p. <sup>51</sup>.
- <sup>72</sup> Orchids were known in China from at least 300 BCE, as they are mentioned in Qū Yuán's famous poem *Lí Sāo* (离骚): "Nine fields of orchids at one time I grew...."
- <sup>73</sup> This combination has also been translated as "orchids and cassia," showing the confusion created by the sharing of the name *gui* by both cassia and the sweet olive (osmanthus).
- <sup>74</sup> Li Zuding, *Chinese Traditional Auspicious Patterns*, p. <sup>158</sup>.
- <sup>75</sup> Hugh Baker, *Ancestral Images: A Hong Kong Album*, Hong Kong: South China Morning Post, 1979, p. <sup>16</sup>.
- <sup>76</sup> Prostitutes, supposedly for this reason, were sometimes known as "peach blossoms" (*táohuā* 桃花).

- <sup>77</sup> Rawson, *Chinese Ornament*, p. [75](#).
- <sup>78</sup> Maggie Keswick (rev. Alison Hardie), *The Chinese Garden: History, Art and Architecture*, 3rd edn, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003, referred to in Claudia Brown, *Weaving China's Past: The Amy S. Clague Collection of Chinese Textiles*, exhibition catalogue, Phoenix, Arizona: Phoenix Art Museum, 2000, p. [74](#).
- <sup>79</sup> Ye, Ye, and Ye, *Auspicious Designs of China*, p. [42](#).
- <sup>80</sup> Schuyler Cammann, "Brief Collection of the Letcher Collection of Mandarin Squares," *Bulletin of the University Museum*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 1953, quoted in *Arts of Asia*, Vol. 34, No. 4, p. [40](#).
- <sup>81</sup> See Sotheby's, *Emperor and Scholar*, p. [141](#).
- <sup>82</sup> *Prunus* is the botanical name for a large group of deciduous and evergreen trees and shrubs known for their gorgeous spring blossoms and some for their edible fruits. They are among the most beautiful trees and shrubs and include the almond, apricot, cherry, nectarine, peach, and plum trees. [www.botany.com](http://www.botany.com)
- <sup>83</sup> Wang Yao-t'ing, *Looking at Chinese Painting*, p. [168](#). The Wade Giles version of his name is Chao Meng-chien.
- <sup>84</sup> The Boston Museum of Fine Art has an unusually beautiful cabinet featuring this scholar's motif on the cabinet's door. See also the *famille noir* example in Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum collection shown in Fig. [56](#).
- <sup>85</sup> The botanic name of the Luóhàn pine is *Yew podocarpus*.
- <sup>86</sup> [www.artsci.wustl.edu/~drkaufma/asianplantspecies.html#Rosaceae](http://www.artsci.wustl.edu/~drkaufma/asianplantspecies.html#Rosaceae)
- <sup>87</sup> H. L. Li notes in *Chinese Flower Arrangement* that the Japanese apricot (*Prunus mume*) is Chinese in origin where it is known by its name *mei*. "In non-botanical literature, it is generally referred to as the 'Plum' although botanically it does not belong to the Plum group but instead to the Apricot group," pp. [43–4](#).
- <sup>88</sup> Valder, *The Garden Plants of China*, p. [106](#).
- <sup>89</sup> Lee Siow Mong, *Spectrum of Chinese Culture*, Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 1986, p. [179](#).
- <sup>90</sup> For a wonderful book on this fascinating subject, see Maggie Bickford, *Bones of Jade, Soul of Ice: The Flowering Plum in Chinese Art*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Art Gallery, 1985, p. [18](#).
- <sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. [17](#).
- <sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. [43](#).
- <sup>93</sup> Mǎ Yuǎn (马远), 1190–1225. Together with another artist, Xià Guī (夏圭), he is often mentioned in Chinese art as epitomizing the highest level of painting of the Southern Song.
- <sup>94</sup> Jenyns, *A Background to Chinese Painting*, p. [161](#).
- <sup>95</sup> Valder, *The Garden Plants of China*, p. [107](#).
- <sup>96</sup> Wolfram Eberhard (trans. G. L. Campbell), *Times Dictionary of Chinese Symbols: An Essential Guide to the Hidden Symbols in Chinese Art, Customs and Beliefs*, Singapore: Federal Publications, 1990, p. [240](#).

- [97](#) In May 2005, China issued a postage stamp featuring one of his most famous paintings, “Magnolia Flowers,” which is in the Palace Museum in Beijing.
- [98](#) Also known as Táo Yuánmíng and Táo Qián.
- [99](#) Bickford, *Bones of Jade, Soul of Ice*, pp. [111–12](#).
- [100](#) This jar is now in the San Antonio Museum of Art in San Antonio, Texas. See Julia B. Curtis, “Tales Told in Porcelain: Jingdezhen Blue-and-White Wares at the San Antonio Museum of Art,” *Orientations*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2005, pp. [46–7](#).
- [101](#) “Taxonomists have suffered much over Chaenomeles. To begin, the species now known as *C. japonica* and *C. speciosa* were hopelessly confused when introduced into England. They were originally classified as pears, but then reclassified as quinces, and then classified as pears again! Finally, when the genus *Pyrus* got too large, they were given their own genus. Then the Chinese quince, *Chaenomeles sinensis*, was reclassified as *Pseudocydonia sinensis* – false-quince. To make things worse, *C. japonica* and *C. speciosa* hybridize at the drop of a hat....” [www.bonsai-bci.com/species/quince.html](http://www.bonsai-bci.com/species/quince.html)
- [102](#) <http://www.plantnames.unimelb.edu.au/Sorting/Chaenomeles.html>
- [103](#) “Fish in the Arts,” *Taipei Journal*, August 17, 2001.
- [104](#) Sotheby’s, *Emperor and Scholar*, item #3. The inscription on the box reads “For the enjoyment of Chén Chóngběn, in the eighth month of autumn in the wùxū [戊戌] year (equivalent to AD 1778) of the Qiánlóng reign.”
- [105](#) Unfortunately, over the years there has been confusion over this plant and true lilies because of its English name Sacred lily or Japanese lily so it has been attributed with symbolisms that belong to the true lily, not this evergreen. Unfortunate, too, are the number of pots of these evergreen plants sitting dusty and neglected in waiting rooms and official reception areas in China.
- [106](#) For example, the expression *chángōng zhé guì* (膽宮折 桂) or “winning laurels in the toad palace” is based on the belief that a *guihuā* tree grows in the lower right-hand corner of the moon. To pass one’s examinations by placing first was such a guarantee of success that it was referred to as “plucking a branch of *sweet-scented osmanthus* [author’s italics] in the toad palace.” This translation is given us by Li Zuding, *Chinese Traditional Auspicious Patterns*, p. [44](#). Most standard Chinese dictionaries translate it as “pluck the laurel branch.” The same statement is found referring to “plucking a branch of cassia.”
- [107](#) According to the Spode Factory website, “The willow pattern, as we know it today, was designed by one Thomas Minton about 1780, and bought from him by Thomas Turner, a famous potter and manager of Shrop-shire pottery.” The site claims that the original story is over 1,000 years old, but no one knows its origin.
- [108](#) Interestingly, there are many verbal expressions that involve the word “willow,” all of which are connected with prostitution. For example, “willow feelings” means sexual desires; “buying willows” means visiting a prostitute; courtesans are said to reside in “willow quarters.” None of these verbal references occurs, to the author’s knowledge, however, as metaphors in art. The Chinese must have sometimes wondered about the willow pattern’s popularity in the West.
- [109](#) Stalberg and Nesi, *China’s Crafts*, p. [47](#).
- [110](#) Martin Palmer and Jay Ramsay, with Man-Ho Kwok, *Kuan Yin: Myths and Prophecies of the Chinese*



*Goddess of Compassion*, London: Thorsons, 1995, p. [39](#).

[111](#) H. L. Li, *Chinese Flower Arrangement*, p. [35](#).

[112](#) Valder, *The Garden Plants of China*, p. [201](#).

[113](#) Ye, Ye, and Ye, *Auspicious Designs of China*, p. [66](#).



Fig. 65 This traditional Chinese New Year (*niánhuà*) poster is a treasure trove of good wishes. It features a plump baby holding an equally plump peach, symbolizing longevity (reinforced by the grapes, which

also symbolize longevity as a peach homophone). The pair of butterflies and mandarin ducks symbolize marital harmony and fidelity, while the combination of mandarin ducks with peony blossoms denote the wish for a prosperous marriage. The lotus flowers and seedpods represent fertility and harmony, the various flowers wishes for success and rank, and the fish riches and abundance. Tucked in is an apple for peace and a kumquat for riches. The pair of magpies, also known as “happiness birds,” signal the impending good things to come. Courtesy of the IISH Stefan R. Landsberger Collection (website: <http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger>).

## Chapter 2

# FRUITS, VEGETABLES, KERNELS, AND SEEDS

Because flowers, fruits, kernels, and seeds hold the powers of fertility and fecundity, the Chinese have linked them to the concept of fertility linguistically through the character *zǐ* (子). The discreet Chinese artist could thus utilize the more refined means of pictures of seeds and nuts to convey the wish that the recipient of an object so decorated should be so fortunate as to beget (many) children. One such example is the very popular Chinese ceramic dish in the shape of a peanut, pea, or bean pod that opens to reveal its contents, symbolizing children in the womb (Fig. 67). **Peanuts** were considered especially auspicious as their name, *huāshēng* (花生), incorporates the morpheme *shēng* (生), meaning “giving birth” (Fig. 66). There are even snuff bottles carrying three-dimensional peanuts as part of their external decoration,<sup>1</sup> and peanuts remain a popular modern Chinese New Year motif.

**Walnuts** (*hétáo* 核桃) represent not only the fertility of nuts, but also are homophonic with the *hé* that means “harmonious” (*hé* 和) and incorporates the *táo* of “peach” (*táozi* 桃子) representing longevity. No wonder we have so many carved walnuts portraying the Eight Immortals (Fig. 68).

One interesting grouping of round fruits or vegetables actually represents something far different than fertility: the successful passing of examinations in the world of the literati. This pun rebus is based on the round shape (*yuán* 圆) of the objects rather than the names of the items themselves – the usual grouping is lychees, longans, and walnuts – for the word *yuán* has another phoneme that means “first” (*yuán* 元). The number “three” in Chinese is *sān* (三), so the picture of these three objects can be described as “three rounds” with the double meaning of “three firsts” (*sānyuán* 三圆). The next step to unlocking this grouping’s real meaning is to know that *ji ě yuán* (角军元), *huìyuán* (会元), and *zhuàngyuán* (状元) were the designations given the top candidate in each of the three rounds of civil service examinations in Imperial China’s examination system.<sup>2</sup> Hence the picture of “three rounds” *sānyuán* (三圆) is a very subtle and

clever way of saying “May you [successively] come out on top at each level of the three civil service examinations” (*liánzhòng sānyuán* 连中三元).<sup>3</sup> This same meaning is conveyed by an arrow piercing three round ancient coins, or a stack of three “shoe” or dumpling-shaped ingots made of gold or silver known as *yuánbǎo* (元宝) (see MONEY p. 255).

Many plants and fruits are associated with feminine beauty, including apricots (women’s eyes should idealistically resemble apricot kernels), cherries (women’s lips are often described as resembling cherries), and apples. Chinese do not have any problem understanding the English expression “She’s the apple of his eye.” A beautiful oval face was described as being like a melon seed (*guāzǐliǎn* 瓜子脸).

A young woman holding a basket of fruit is more often than not Hé Xiānggū (何仙姑), the only female in the famous group of Eight Immortals (see p. 176 and Figs. 419, 420). Immortal since the age of fourteen, she flies through the air collecting fruit for her mother and is usually depicted with a peach or lotus, which are her special symbols.

A carving or drawing of a mountain of fruit and flowers is usually an allusion to the legendary mountain discovered by Sūn Wùkōng (孫悟空), also known as the Monkey King in the classic novel *Journey to the West*. A single monkey holding a peach (see Fig. 307) is also the representation of this famous literary hero (see MONKEY p. 137).

Baskets and groupings of fruit (see, for example, Fig. 75) have the same collective symbolism as groupings of flowers. For example, a still life of an apple, peach, and pomegranate represent the three good wishes of a peaceful life (apple), longevity (peach), and descendants (pomegranate).

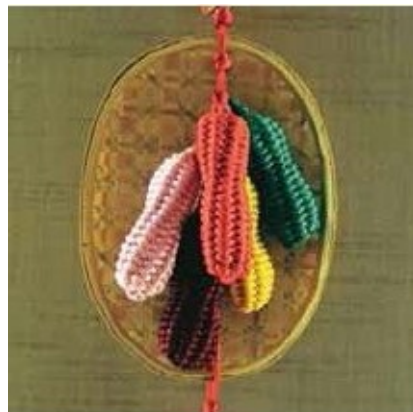


Fig. 66 This Lunar New Year charm of silk peanuts was found in a roadside gas station on the outskirts of Shanghai.



Fig. 67 A porcelain peanut containing two nuts, a popular Lunar New Year motif and auspicious symbol of fertility and abundance.



Fig. 68 A walnut covered with an intricately carved scene depicting the Eight Immortals.



Fig. 69 Once carved in ivory, but today in plasticene, cabbages and insects remain a popular theme symbolizing wealth because of the similarity in Chinese between *cài* (cabbage) and *cái* (cash, money).





Fig. 70 This gold-plated cabbage with its attendant three monkeys was presented by a group of loyal employees to their boss as a Chinese New Year gift in a Year of the Monkey.

## APPLE

Apples (*píngguǒ* 苹果) represent “peaceful” (*píng* 平) because both words share the homophone *píng*. A gift of apples or a still life arrangement that includes apples represents a wish for peace (see the apples in Fig. [75](#)). See also PRUNUS p. [38](#).

## BRAN

See grain p. [52](#).

## CABBAGE

Through the use of homophones, cabbage (*báicài* 白菜 or *qīngcài* 青菜) renders the expression *qīngbái* (清白), which means “stainless” or “pure” (Fig. [69](#)). *Bái* by itself means “white” while another *qīng* homophone (清) means “fresh.” Together with **turnips** (*wújīng* 芜菁), these are the two simplest, most basic vegetable crops of China, the two crops that sustain all Chinese families, rich or poor.<sup>4</sup> The two are thus often portrayed together to evoke the expression *qīngbái chuán jiā* (清白传家), or the sentiment that “pureness [of character] is a family heirloom,” especially when a dragonfly (*qīngtíng* 虫青蜓) is depicted hovering above the vegetables (see DRAGONFLY p. [96](#)).

Any other depiction of a cabbage, especially if accompanied by one of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac, is playing on the similarities between “cabbage” (*cài* 菜) and “cash” (*cái* 财), meaning “money, wealth” (Fig. [70](#)). See also GOD OF WEALTH p. [161](#). This is the meaning of the carved cabbages and turnips, for example, a cabbage with monkeys or with a goat, that can be found in Chinese department stores and tourist shops each Chinese New Year.

## CALABASH OR BOTTLE GOURD

See gourd p. [50](#).

## CHERRY

We know from a number of sources that cherries were once an important sacred offering and used for ritual distribution,<sup>5</sup> but the cherry’s appearance in Chinese art is almost wholly limited to the flowering tree (as opposed to the fruit), so the flowering cherry is discussed with similar flowering fruit trees under PRUNUS p. [38](#).

## CHESTNUT

The Chinese name for chestnut (*lìzi* 栗子) consists of two parts, *li* and *zi*. *Li* has another homophone meaning “to beget” (*lì* 立) and *zǐ* (子) means both “seed” and “progeny or children,” so a chestnut symbolizes the begetting of children. When

chestnuts are depicted with dates (*zǎo* 零), the meaning becomes “May you soon (*zǎo* 早) have sons (*zǐ* 子).” Chestnuts were popularly used as a carving medium.

## CHINESE DATE

Both the fruit and plant of the common jujube plant, also known as Chinese dates (because the fruit can be dried like dates, although they are not true dates), symbolize “soon.” The berries have several names in Chinese, including *dàzǎo* (大零, “big dates”), *hóngzǎo* (红零, “red dates”), or just plain *zǎo* (零), all of which share a homophone with the word that means “early” or “soon” (*zǎo* 早). Hence, when they appear in a picture or design, they carry the meaning “May you achieve [whatever benefit is portrayed] soon” (Fig. [71](#)).

The wood or fruit of the jujube (*Ziziphus jujuba*), also known as the common jujube (*jí* 棘), has a morpheme that means “speedily” or “soon” (*jí* 急), so both the fruit and the jujube wood itself add a sense of impending eventuality. As a result, they were sometimes scattered in marriage beds together with other seeds, such as watermelon seeds, to convey a wish that the bride would quickly become pregnant; the same message is conveyed when they are combined with the LYCHEE (see p. [54](#)). Jujube wood was sometimes used for making children’s cradles.



Fig. 71 “Harvesting Jujubes,” a folk print by artist Jing Di Tang (丁济堂 purchased by the author in a market in Xian, summer 2006.



Fig. 72 Trays and plates of dates, peanuts, seeds, and other symbolic foods are always present at celebratory times in China, especially during the Lunar New Year and at marriage feasts.



Fig. 73 The motif on this *rúyì* head-shaped silk pouch is known as *sānduō* or the Three Plenties.



Fig. 74 Detail of a Chinese rug depicting the motif known as the Three Plenties (left to right, pomegranate, peach, Buddha's Hand citron), together in one shape, reminiscent of the Buddhist symbol known as the *triratna* or Three Jewels of Buddhism, although there is no basic relationship between them. Courtesy of Angela Soeteber.





Fig. 75 This Chinese Lunar New Year poster is richly decorated top right with a large character (*fú*) for happiness and a bowl of fruit and money in the form of a string of coins. Amongst the fruit are apples for peace, a Buddha's Hand citron for happiness and longevity, grapes for abundance and longevity, and peanuts for fertility.

The common jujube is either a deciduous tree growing to a height of 40 feet (12 meters) or a large shrub, depending upon where it grows and how much water is available for growth (Fig. [72](#)). It is found in the drier regions of China and can be identified by its spiny branches. The word for jujube (*jí* 棘) also

means “thorn bushes, brambles” in Chinese.

When combined with a cassia tree, jujube seeds express the hope for sons who will attain high office as the sound *guì* can mean both “cassia” (桂) and “of high rank” or “noble” (贵).

## CITRON

There is an inedible bright yellow citron with long segments that grow out of its stem, which resembles the hand position (the *mudra* known as *dhyana mudra*) of the Buddha in meditation, and is therefore known as Buddha’s Hand (*fóshǒu* 佛手) (Figs. [76](#), [77](#)).<sup>6</sup> Its scientific name is *var. sarcodactylis*.

In non-religious contexts, a lone citron is often regarded as representing “happiness” and “longevity” because of the similarity in sound between *fó* (佛, Buddha) and *fú* (才, happiness), and *shǒu* (手, “hand”) and *shòu* (寿, “longevity”), that creates the happy combination of *fúshǒu* (福寿), “happiness and longevity” (Fig. [75](#)).



Fig. 76 A pair of lotus shoes embroidered with a Buddha’s Hand citron to represent happiness and longevity. Note the *rúyì* patterns as well as the character for longevity (*shòu*) on the heel.



Fig. 77 A pair of lotus shoes bearing a Buddha's Hand citron for happiness and longevity. The vine adds the sentiment "everlasting."



Fig. 78 This large ceramic fish pot has it all – the motif known as *sānduō* or the Three Plenties (the peach representing longevity, the pomegranate progeny, and the citron the blessings that bring happiness), five red bats to represent vast good fortune, a *rúyì* border, butterflies, five-colored clouds, and fish for abundance.



Fig. 79 A beautiful pair of winecups featuring lychees, the Buddha's Hand citron, and plums in a variation of the pattern known as *sānduō* or the Three Plenties. Courtesy of Sotheby's.

When this citron is depicted with two other fruit (usually a peach and a pomegranate), it becomes a member of an auspicious grouping of fruit known as the Three Abundances or Three Plenties (*sānduō* 三多) (Figs. 73-79). The peach represents longevity; the pomegranate, with its many seeds, progeny; and the citron, the blessings that bring happiness, which to some might mean “spiritual blessings” and to others might be “money.”<sup>7</sup> Given the continued popularity of the Three Abundances as a decorative motif, the latter interpretation of “long life, descendants, and money” may be the more popular one. Lychees, longans, and plums are also commonly depicted as a grouping of three,<sup>8</sup> as well as other variant groupings.



Fig. 80 A purple crystal snuff bottle in the shape of an eggplant.



## CORN

See grain p. [52](#).

## CUCUMBER

See gourd p. [50](#).

## EGGPLANT

The cap of the eggplant (*qiéguān* 前冠, also pronounced as *jiāguān*) can represent coming of age, for example, “being invested with the cap” (*jiāguān* 加冠), as well as being a pun meaning “to rise in rank or be promoted” (*jiāguān* 加官), while an eggplant is a fertility symbol as it is both fast-growing and has numerous seeds (Fig. [80](#)).<sup>9</sup> It was for this reason that classical Chinese botany identified eggplants as members of the melon family.<sup>10</sup>

## FUNGUS

The Chinese strongly revere a special fungus that is known popularly as the “sacred fungus” or “plant of immortality,” the *língzhī* (灵芝), also known as *ruìzhī* (瑞芝) and *língcǎo* (灵草) (Fig. [82](#)). Its botanical name is *Glossy ganoderma*. The *língzhī*’s medicinal properties were first mentioned in the oldest Chinese herbal manuscript dating back to the Qin and Han Dynasties, *Shén Nóng Běn Cǎo Jīng* (神农本草经, *The Deity of Agriculture’s Materia Medica*), where it was stated that not only could it cure and prevent disease but also extend life. It is therefore strongly associated with long life and immortality and was believed to be a key ingredient in the elixir of immortality.

Note that the head of a *rúyì* (如意) scepter (that denotes nobility and rank) almost always resembles a *língzhī* fungus (Fig. [81](#)) (see SCEPTERS p. [258](#)). The fungus is thus used to represent the *rúyì* expression “according to your wishes,” and is commonly found combined with other symbols, for example, the evergreen plant *Rohdea japonica*, to express the salutation *wànshì rúyì* (万事如意), “Hope everything goes the way you want.”

When *língzhī* is combined with two catfish (*nián* 舍占, homophonous with the *nián* 年 that means “year”), the meaning becomes *niánnián rúyì* (年年如意),



“May your wishes come true year after year.”

A classic auspicious arrangement consisting of *Glossy ganoderma*, narcissus (*shuǐxiān* 水仙), a longevity stone (*shòushí* 寿石), and nandina or Heavenly Bamboo (天竹) is a longevity wish explained in the entry under NARCISSUS p. [32](#).

Stylized into border patterns, it is sometimes difficult to discern a row of *rúyì* from stylized bat or cloud borders. A good clue is that the clouds are more rounded and the bats have more bumps. You will learn to see the difference.

## GOURD

Popular Chinese mythology attributes the creation of mankind to the original ancestors, a husband and wife that in many stories were originally brother and sister, known as Fúxī (伏羲) and Nǚ wā (女媧) (Fig. [383](#)). A gourd is often an intrinsic part of the story to the extent that some scholars believe that “the First Ancestor God (a combination of Fúxī and Nǚwā) and gourd worship formed the two main traditional themes in Chinese folk art.”<sup>[11](#)</sup> Scholar Wen Yiduo (1899–1946) found “forty-nine brother–sister myth versions collected by other ethnographers from Miao, Yao, and other ethnic peoples to demonstrate that Fuxi and Nüwa were in fact gourds.”<sup>[12](#)</sup>

**Calabash or bottle gourds** (*húlu* 葫芦) in paintings generally represent the power of healing or protection against disease and are associated with longevity and old age, whether still on the vine and surrounded by foliage and other smaller gourds, or dried and hollowed out and held in the hands of a sage or immortal.

We know the Chinese cultivated gourds, including bottle gourds, as decorative items as far back as Neolithic times, when they were already a popular ceramic shape,<sup>[13](#)</sup> and as early as the Tang and Song Dynasties very small gourds of an inch or so in length were especially treasured, as they still are today.<sup>[14](#)</sup> Gourds were used as drinking vessels from the Ming Dynasty onward,<sup>[15](#)</sup> and they were also carved for use as hawk feed containers, pigeon whistles, and insect cages.

Bottle gourds were once used by Chinese chemists to mix and hold drugs (Fig. [86](#)), and thus became the adopted shop sign of Chinese apothecaries. Interestingly, because tobacco was regarded as a “healing drug” in traditional

China, the small embroidered purses we find in the shape of gourds were not used for holding money in pre-modern China, but rather tobacco<sup>16</sup> or “snuff,” as it was once known.

In addition to their use as medicine containers, the very name calabash implies protective qualities, as *húlu* 葫芦 is homophonous with a word meaning “protect, shield, or guard” (*hù* 护), and another meaning “blessing” (*hù* 祐). As a result, calabash carved from wood, ivory, or jade, gourd-shaped ceramic and glass vases and bottles (Figs. 83, 84), and paper-cuts featuring gourds became popular. Calabash-shaped metal and paper charms exist, as do lanterns made in the shape of gourds, intended to ward off evil spirits and diseases. A picture of a calabash emitting a vapor hints at the magical powers held within ready to be released to benefit its owner or the property’s inhabitants (see Fig. 415).



Fig. 81 The head of a *rúyì* scepter that denotes nobility and rank almost always resembles a *língzhī* fungus.



Fig. 82 Fungi are found in nearly all Chinese markets and even have their own sections in major department stores. This large fungus was found for sale at a roadside market in Yunnan, southwest China.



Fig. 83 A Cizhou-style double gourd vase decorated with a donkey motif. Ht 32 cm.



Fig. 84 A set of three glass *hulu*-shaped bottles, all decorated with members of the pumpkin/gourd

family, found in Beijing's famous Panjiayuan market. Original use unknown.



Fig. 85 A small metal pumpkin-shaped cricket cage.

A small single gourd hanging on a belt or grooming kit serves as a charm to attract longevity while protecting its owner from harm. One of the Eight Immortals, Lǐ Tiěguāi (李铁拐, “Li with the iron crutch”), is easily identified not only by his crutch but also the gourd that is always by his side (see Figs. [413](#), [415](#) and p. [179](#)).

Calabash or bottle gourds were often depicted in Chinese jewelry by placing two gemstones, one larger than the other, side by side to form the gourd shape. During the Qing Dynasty, snuff bottles appeared in the shape of gourds and were even formed from small gourds.<sup>[17](#)</sup>

Calabash were very well suited to the keeping of insects, and some of the most beautiful antique insect cages are made of gourds, often with beautiful carved ivory tops (see CRICKET p. [180](#)). Gourd-and pumpkin-shaped cricket cages were also made out of lesser materials such as metal and bamboo (Fig. [85](#)).



Fig. 86 Bottle gourds were once used to mix and hold drugs and beverages, associating them forever with potent powers.

We even know that at one time it was popular to try and grow young gourds in predetermined auspicious shapes by inserting them, while still on the vine, into molds. In the Victoria & Albert Museum in London there is a beautiful large “peach” with an embossed peach design which is, in reality, a gourd made in exactly such a manner. On the top is a mark reading “beautiful object made for enjoyment in the Qiánlóng era (乾隆, 1736–1795).”<sup>18</sup>

The gourd expert Wang Shixiang writes: “Around 1930, I saw, in a curio shop at Beijing’s Liulichang, a gourd cultivated into a shape of a ruyi by a combination of the bounding and moulding techniques.”<sup>19</sup> Decorations that brought to mind or depicted the Eight Immortals were especially popular, although we find gourds decorated with all manner of auspicious motifs, including one described as having been molded into a four-sided shape with a picture of a bat (*fú* 蝠), flowering prunus branch (*yīngtáo* 櫻桃), fan (*shàn* 扇), and chime stone (*qìng* 磬) to create the sentiment “good luck comes from good deeds” or “doing good deeds will bring you good fortune” (*fúyīn shànnqìng* 福因善庆),<sup>20</sup> where *fúyīn* means “the way to good fortune,” *shàn* means “good,” and *qìng* “celebrate.”

Gourds even play a major role in some Chinese novels, usually because of



their magical abilities. “A gourd capable of holding ten thousand people features in *Xī Yóu Jì* (西游记, *Journey to the West*), the novel written in the late Ming dynasty based on Yuan and earlier tales.”<sup>21</sup>

Distinctive gourd motifs, together with the four-clawed dragons known as *mǎng* (麟), “featured on robes worn by members of the Ming imperial family after presenting offerings to the Kitchen God on the twenty-fourth day of the twelfth month of the Chinese lunar calendar.”<sup>22</sup> They were worn until the first day of the New Year and were associated with good luck.



**Fig. 87 A mound of pumpkins awaits the Chinese New Year-buying public. Pumpkins are not only associated with fertility, but are also propitious because of their large, round shape and golden color. Courtesy Angela Soeteber.**



Fig. 88 A pumpkin amidst flowers and vine. Detail from the Three Ears of Corn Hall, Yu Garden, Shanghai.

Because **cucumbers**, **gourds**, **melons**, and **pumpkins** (all collectively known as *guā* 瓜) grow on vines and have large numbers of seeds, they are all associated with fertility (Fig. [87](#)).<sup>23</sup>

Tendriled foliage (known as *wàn* 蔓 in Chinese) makes its occurrence as a rebus with the *wàn* that means “10,000” (万). Hence, a gourd (or melons or grapes) surrounded by its vine or foliage is all the more auspicious because the meaning has now been enhanced by the formulaic expression of “many,” as in wishing someone “many offspring,” if the gourd is to be understood as a fertility symbol (Fig. [88](#)). Sometimes a swastika – a stylized *wàn* – is tucked into the design to ensure viewers understand the pun.

Bats depicted with gourds confirm that the gourd is being used to represent “good fortune,” which mostly meant male offspring.<sup>24</sup> Bats and gourds were a common combination on the hairpins once worn by the imperial concubines of the Qing Dynasty, wishing “good luck with fertility” – every imperial concubine’s most fervent wish, as it guaranteed one’s future. The addition of beans to some of these hairpins reinforces the concept of fertility, as the seeds in bean pods represent unborn children in the womb.

Butterflies and gourds are another popular combination. Butterflies (*húdié* 蝴蝶) have a homophonic double with a phoneme that means “repeatedly” or “repeating again and again” (*dié* 迭). Hence, when combined with any good luck symbol, butterflies add the thought that the good event should repeat itself. For example, when combined with melons (*guā* 瓜), pomegranates, or any other seed-bearing fruit, they express the desire for repeated generations of children. Another more complex expression is in the form of the double rebus *dié miánmián* that can mean “repeated” (*dié* 迭) and “unbroken” (*miánmián* 绵绵) or “repeated (*dié* 迭) continuous (*mián* 绵) childbirth” (*miǎn* 娩). To put it more elegantly, “May your line of descendants be unbroken.” If there are young fresh melons in the picture, the meaning of “repeated” can be expressed without a butterfly hovering overhead as, fortuitously, the word in classical Chinese that means “young melons just forming” (*dié* 𦏧) is another homophone of the *dié* (迭) that means “repeatedly.”



Fig. 89 A snuff bottle in the shape of an ear of corn, complete with worm, found by the author in a Beijing street market.



Fig. 90 A plastic charm to be hung from a car's rear view mirror, found on sale in a Shanghai gas station, features ears of corn.

## GRAIN

Grain, including **bran**, **corn**, **millet**, and **wheat**, is often used as a generic term to represent plant life and is therefore the element often translated as “wood,” such as when it appears as one of the Twelve Symbols of Imperial Authority (Fig. 91) (see TWELVE p. 231). Depictions of grain have been used throughout Chinese history to represent fecundity; for example, sheaves of grain were once hung from roof beams of new buildings to express the desire for agricultural riches.

The basic term for “grain” (*lì* 粒) shares a homophone with the *lì* that means “profit” (*lì* 利). The basic morpheme for wheat or bran (*fū* 麸) is not surprisingly homophonous with several other morphemes that mean “riches and abundance” (*fù* 富),<sup>25</sup> as well as “husband” (*fū* 夫), “father” (*fù* 父), and “woman, wife” (*fù* 妇). When such symbols are combined with the sound *zǐ* (子, “seed” and “child” as in bran (*fūzi* 麸子), it is easy to understand why grain is such a perfect fertility symbol. Grain is just one of the many symbolic plants and fruits – along with the pomegranate, chestnut, pear, peach, watermelon, gourd, pumpkin, and water lily – that are associated with marriage ceremonies.

Corn is known by many names in China, including *gùlì* (谷粒), *gùlèi* (谷类), *yùjiāo* (玉菱), and *yùmì* (“jade rice” 玉米) (Fig. [92](#)). Food experts tell us that modern corn, which was indigenous to the Americas, first came to China during the Ming Dynasty. Corn is often found listed, however, as one of the five types of cereal long grown in China. This misunderstanding probably arose during translation, as we know China did have a form of sorghum known as “broomcorn.” Since the Ming, however, we have porcelain and carved ears of corn symbolizing fertility (an ear of corn consists of many kernels). Porcelain and carved ears of corn have been found in Yunnan Province as an earring motif,<sup>[26](#)</sup> and corn was even used as the inspiration for some Qing Dynasty snuff bottles (Fig. [89](#)). Corn remains a popular Chinese New Year folk motif symbolizing the desire for future rich harvests (Fig. [90](#)).

For the meaning of a sheaf of rice (*mǐ* 米) in the pincers of a crab, see CRAB p. [94](#). See also RICE p. [58](#).

## GRAPES AND GRAPEVINES

Grapes and grapevines represent abundance, fecundity, and heirs, but when there are squirrels (frequently resembling rats since their name translates as “pine tree rats” running around in them (see SQUIRREL p. [93](#)). The rebus is based on two homophones: the squirrel (*sōngshǔ* 松鼠) provides the source of the word “pine” (*sōng* 松), while the grapes (*táo* 萄) provide the homophone for peaches (*táozi* 桃子), both well-known symbols of longevity. The vines (*wàn* 蔓) add the extra touch of intensifying and extending the wish (see p. [40](#) for a discussion of “vines”). This design “seems to have become popular during the mid-Qing period,”<sup>[27](#)</sup> and one finds numerous snuff bottles and other artifacts embellished with it. Grapes are also an alternate symbol of autumn (Fig. [94](#)).





**Fig. 91 Grain decorates this door in Shanghai's Yu Garden's Three Ears of Corn Hall. Carved on the door and windows are rice ears, millet, wheat seedlings, melons, and fruit – all symbols of abundant harvests.**



**Fig. 92 Another door from the Three Ears of Corn Hall, this one with the three ears of corn motif.**



Fig. 93 A simple folk painting of grapes and roosters represents farmyard abundance and good luck, the word for domestic rooster (*jī*) resembling that for “lucky, auspicious” (*jí*).



Fig. 94 Although difficult to see, this twelfth-century Song Dynasty Yingqing bowl has a finely carved grapevine on its interior beneath a glossy pale turquoise glaze. The grapes (*táo*) share the same sound as peaches (*táozi*), a well-known symbol of longevity. Grapes are also a symbol of autumn. The vine adds the meaning of “unending” or “unbroken.”

## JUJUBE

See CHINESE DATE p. [47](#).

## KUMQUAT

See ORANGE p. [54](#).

## LONGAN

The pulpy fruit *Euphoria longan* or *Nephelium longan*, related to the lychee and known as “Chinese dragon eyes” or longan in English, derives its name from its Chinese name *lóngyǎn* 龙眼 (*lóng* is “dragon,” *yǎn* is “eye.” It is also known colloquially in Chinese as *guìyuán* (桂圆). This name provides the homophone *guì* (贵), which can mean “costly and precious” as well as “of high rank or noble.” A longan in a still life thus adds these meanings to the composition.

## LOTUS ROOT

Lotus roots (*ǒu* 藕) are a popular vegetable and are frequently depicted in Chinese art. They are readily identified by their distinctive round slices with “open holes.” There is a saying in Chinese, *ǒuduàn sīlián* (藕断丝连), “When the lotus root is broken, the fibers still hold together,” used to refer to “lingering sentiments.”<sup>28</sup> A lotus root can thus represent a male/female couple. For more information on the lotus as a flower, see LOTUS p. [27](#).

## LOTUS SEED

Lotus seeds (*liánzǐ* 莲子) are probably one of the most common types of seeds and are a part of every Chinese New Year sweet tray, having the double entendre of “children, one after another” based on the puns of the *lián* (连), which means “successive” and the fact that *zǐ* (子) can mean both “seed” and “children.”<sup>29</sup>

## LYCHEE

Lychees (*Litchi chinensis*) are a popular summer fruit enjoyed for their sweet and juicy pulp (Fig. [95](#)). Their red outer shell makes them especially auspicious. Since they are found only in Asia, their English name derives from the Chinese *lìzhī* (荔枝). In China, the lychee is a feminine symbol of romance and love because of its red color (the color of brides) as well as a famous story of how the last emperor

of the Tang Dynasty, Xuánzōng (玄宗, r. 712–56), loved his favorite concubine, the famous Yáng Guìfēi (楊貴妃), so much that he ordered her favorite fruit brought daily from Canton (now Guangzhou) in southern China to the capital city Chang'an (now Xian), a distance of 900 miles (1500 km), much to the disapproval of many members of his court (Fig. [424](#)).



Fig. 95 Lychees decorate this Ming Dynasty carved red lacquer box. Ht 3.81 cm, diam. 7.3 cm. Courtesy of San Diego Museum of Art (Gift of Mrs Dorothea W. Allen in memory of her parents, Mr and Mrs Ernest E. White).

A pair of lychees symbolizes fertility.

*Li* is also a very common morpheme, and hence is one of those Chinese words with numerous meanings in terms of objects (pear, plum, carp, grain, lychee) and propitious benefits – “strength” (*lì* 力) and “profit or benefits” (*lì* 利). Lychees are thus generally understood to represent such virtues, the reason pictures of this fruit are found in Chinese corporate offices. For example, a painting showing a tree bearing 100 lychees means “may this company be very profitable.” For their meanings when combined with the PERSIMMON, see p. [56](#), PEACH p. [55](#), and CITRON p. [48](#).

## MELON

See GOURD p. [50](#).

## MILLET

See GRAIN p. [52](#).

## MUSHROOM

The northern Chinese regarded mushrooms (*gū* 蕈) as symbols of fecundity, and as a result they are found in great numbers as carved belt toggles. But, as noted by Schuyler Cammann, they are not found elsewhere in Chinese art.<sup>[30](#)</sup> He attributes their association with fertility with their ability to appear in vast numbers overnight out of “seemingly barren soil” and notes the auspicious phrase *rútóng zhāojūn* (如同朝菌), “like (*rutong* 如) early morning (*zhāo* 朝) fungus (*jūn* 菌).” We should also not overlook the simple fact that the shape of some mushrooms closely resembles the male penis. The possession of little carved phallic fetishes is a widespread practice throughout most of Asia, even today, especially in Thailand.

## ONION

The word onion (*cōng* 葱) shares a homophone with “clever or intelligent” (*cōng* 耳总), hence some contemporary Chinese artists paint onions to represent intelligence. This visual pun is not found, however, in traditional Chinese art.

## ORANGE

The Chinese character for orange can be written in two ways – *jú* (橘) or *jú* (橘) – but the first variant is considered more auspicious as it is composed of two components, the part on the left (the radical) that means “plant [wood, tree]” (*mù* 木) and the part on the right that means “auspicious, lucky” (*jí* 吉). Hence, the orange is seen as an “auspicious plant.” The Western convention is to translate this character as an orange,<sup>[31](#)</sup> although the fruits most commonly referred to are, in fact, better known in the West as “mandarin oranges,” being smaller and more loose-skinned than, for example, the larger oranges of Spain. The most common oranges in southern China are the loose-skin varieties often identified as tangerines in Chinese–English dictionaries.<sup>[32](#)</sup> At Chinese New Year, the variety of fruits used covers the gamut from conventional oranges to



mandarin oranges to tangerines to kumquats (Fig. 96). Whatever the specific variety, however, during the Chinese Lunar New Year oranges serve as a symbol for riches and good fortune, primarily due to their golden color and round form, both being auspicious.



Fig. 96 Chinese New Year vendors sell small *goupings* of five oranges to be set on family altars as offerings to one's ancestors, signaling the desire for future riches and good fortune.



Fig. 97 A tray of kumquats in a Kunming street market. Kumquats derive their name from Cantonese where *kam* means “gold” and *kwat* is an “orange.”

The tiny oranges known in English as **kumquats** that are particularly linked with the Lunar New Year in southern China, derive their name from the Cantonese dialect name *kam* meaning “gold,” and *kwat* meaning “orange” (Fig. 97). (In Mandarin, kumquats are known as *jīnjú* (金橘), *jīn* being “gold” and *jú*

“oranges/ tangerines.”) The addition of oranges to a still life or other arrangement can also add the appendage “speedily” (*jí* 急) to the other portrayed wishes or sentiments.<sup>33</sup> For their meaning when combined with the PERSIMMON, see p. 56.

## PEACH

Peaches (*táozi* 桃子) symbolize immortality due to their affinity with the famous peaches of immortality (*pántáo* 蟠桃) that grow in the garden of the Daoist goddess Xī Wángmǔ (西王母), otherwise known as the Queen Mother of the West (see p. 203 and Fig. 469). At her birthday celebrations held every 3,000 years, she distributes her special peaches to her heavenly guests, granting them eternal youth and immortality. Xī Wángmǔ is typically portrayed in her garden accompanied by two hand-maidens, one of whom carries a tray of peaches. Two other women are often portrayed with peaches of immortality. One is the beautiful goddess Mágū (麻姑), easily identified by her radiant beauty and youth and long nails (she is described as being perpetually eighteen years old and is usually depicted with a spotted deer), see p. 206; the other is the sole female member of the group known as the Eight Immortals, Hé Xiāngū (何仙姑), but she is rarely shown alone (see p. 208).

Peaches are the ubiquitous symbol of longevity in Chinese art and therefore one of the most important Chinese symbols to remember.

The God of Longevity, Lǎo Shòuxīng (老寿星), also invariably carries an oversized peach (see p. 159). He is so frequently portrayed that few will be unfamiliar with his easily identified vast, protruding, bulbous forehead, big ears, long drooping eyebrows, white beard, and plump robe-clad figure.

When a peach is depicted with a pomegranate (*shíliú* 石才留) and the [finger] citron (*fóshǒu* 佛手) known as Buddha’s Hand, they form an auspicious group known as the Three Abundances or the Three Plenties (*sānduō* 三多, see p. 48 and Figs. 73, 74, 78, 79). The peach represents “longevity,” the pomegranate “fertility,” and the Buddha’s Hand “blessings.” Readers may find it interesting to know that the famous Delft blue-and-white “onion pattern” is believed to be a “misunderstood imitation of the Chinese ‘peach and pomegranate’” combination.<sup>34</sup>

The combination of bats and peaches is one of the most prolific motifs in

Chinese art, in part because a peach will often be a proxy for the fifth bat in the popular grouping, the Five Blessings (usually represented by five bats in a circle), but which is also the meaning of four bats surrounding a central peach. A more informal combination of bats and peaches is known as *fú shòu shuāng quán* (才虽寿双全) and can be translated as “May both blessings and longevity be complete” in your life.

Peach wood (*táomù* 桃木) also has special powers, as does the wood from many fruit-and nut-bearing trees (including plum, persimmon, pear, loquat, and jujube), known collectively as *xiānmù* (仙木) or “wood of the immortals.” A second-century text, the *Lùnhéng* (论衡, *Critical Essays*) by Wáng Chōng (王充), noted “The district magistrates of our time are in the habit of having peach-trees cut down and carved into human statues, which they place by the gate, and they paint the shapes of tigers on the door screens ... to ward off evil influences.”<sup>35</sup>

In olden times, peach wood arrows and amulets were also fashioned and carried on one’s person or displayed outside homes to dispel evil spirits during Chinese New Year. These peach wood charms, known as *táofú* (桃符), are now virtually extinct, but the term still refers to the New Year couplets hung on the doors of Chinese homes at this time of year. Parents fashioned children’s cradles from peach wood (see PADLOCKS p. 257). Peach bark, wood, kernels, and roots were all part of a Chinese apothecary’s inventory.<sup>36</sup>

Peach stones, pits, or kernels were sometimes made into snuff bottles. Snuff bottles were also made to reproduce the peach pit shape and characteristics. These objects contribute yet another symbolic dimension to peaches, in addition to their symbolism of longevity (and related use as protective charms) and fertility. The Chinese word for kernel (*rén* 仁) has a very important second meaning in Chinese philosophy, for it also denotes “benevolence” or “kind heartedness.” This is one of the characteristics to be displayed by a Confucian “gentleman” or *jūnzi* (君子) in Confucian thought. An object made out of a peach stone that would have been used by the literati class of Imperial China, such as a snuff bottle,<sup>37</sup> is reminding its owner to possess and exhibit this virtue.

## PEAR

Chinese culture abounds with the use of “pear” as an adjective (the *pípa* is

sometimes described as a pear-shaped lute; some vases are described as pear-shaped, etc.), and pear wood is used and mentioned for its protective qualities, but actual depictions of pears in Chinese art are scarce. This is interesting because *li* is a very common morpheme in Chinese; hence one would expect to find pictures of pears (*lízi* 梨子) or pears in combination with other fruit to add the thought of “strength” (*lì* 力) or “profit or benefits” (*lì* 利). Perhaps it is the meaning of another *lí* (离), “to leave, or part with,” that is feared might overshadow or trump the other meanings that inhibits its use.

Nonetheless, there are a few paintings of “yellow pears” (*huánglí* 黄梨), perhaps representing the rebus “golden profits” (*huánglì* 黄利), and at least one painting by a contemporary Chinese artist of pears together with peaches.<sup>38</sup>

## PERSIMMON

Sometimes known as Chinese plums or, when dried, Chinese figs, persimmons are easily identified by their bright yellow to orange gelatinous flesh (Fig. 98). They can be round, conical, oblate, or nearly square, but it is their round shape, plumpness, color, and sweetness that makes them auspicious. They have a long history of cultivation in China dating back to the Han Dynasty, and later were “popular as offerings for the Autumn Festival, which fell on the 15th day of the 8th month, since they are both round and orange-red.”<sup>39</sup>

Significantly for us, their name (*shì* 柿) resembles other words, including a *shì* (事) that means “matter, affair, thing, event, business,” so they have enhanced value as metaphors.

A painting showing persimmons (*shì* 柿) with mandarin oranges (*jú* 橘) conveys the wish for “good fortune (*jí* 吉) in all undertakings (*shì* 事).”

An arrangement of persimmons and lychees (*lìzhī* 荔枝) should be interpreted as “May you have a profitable (*lì* 利) business deal (*shì* 事).”

A picture of persimmons (*shì* 柿) with the fungus known as *língzhī* conveys the wish *shìshìrúyì* (事事如意), which translates into “May things (*shì* 事) go as you wish (*rúyì* 如意)” or, more colloquially, “Hope all goes smoothly” or “Everything will go as you want.”<sup>40</sup>

Add some lilies (*bǎi hé* 百合) or perhaps a miniature (bonsai) cypress tree (*bǎi* 柏) and the meaning escalates to “May you be successful in everything you

desire.” To understand this, you need to know that *bǎi* can also mean “100” (百) and “100 things” (*bǎ ishì* 百事), which should be taken to mean “everything.” And if you find the evergreen plant known as the Sacred or Japanese lily in the arrangement, the interpretation is even more auspicious as it expands the wish from “100” to “10,000.” The Chinese name for the Sacred or Japanese lily (*Rohdea japonica*) is *wànniánqīng* (万年青义), where *wàn* (万) means “10,000” or “myriad.” Hence, an arrangement of persimmons, fungus, and the Japanese lily yields the meaning of *wànshì rúyì* (万事如意, “everything as you desire”), which is sometimes abbreviated to simply *wànyì* (万意).

Another Chinese character, *shì* (仕), means “being an official” or “gentleman.” This is the clue to interpreting a scroll hanging in the British Museum entitled *The Gentleman Scholar*. It shows no person, only a single crow (*yā* 鸦) and six persimmons (*shì* 柿), which is a rebus for “elegant gentlemen” (*yashi* 雅仕), making use of the *yǎ* (雅) that means “refined, elegant.”<sup>41</sup> The theme of six persimmons is an old one in Chinese art. Perhaps the most famous painting of six persimmons is the Southern Song monochrome ink on paper painting by the Buddhist monk Mù Qǐ (未乞, 1200-74), who is also the artist of a very famous painting of Guan-yin. Both can be seen in Kyoto’s Daitokuji Museum in Japan.



Fig. 98 Persimmons are auspicious not only for their festive orange red color but also because their name (*shì*) is a homophone of the word meaning “business.” Hence, persimmons are often shown with other fruit to include the wish for successful business ventures (note the Chinese New Year baby poster, Fig. 65, to see them used in such a combination).





Fig. 99 A paper pineapple hangs above a busy Chinese New Year stall, symbolizing riches and abundance. Photo courtesy of Sha Ying.



Fig. 100 A plastic pineapple charm to attract “golden profits” found on sale in a Shanghai gas station.

## PINEAPPLE

There are several names in Chinese for the pineapple, which being yellow, is also associated with gold (Fig. [100](#)). The most common is *bōluó* (菠萝), calling to mind the *bó* (博) that means “rich, abundant, plentiful.” A variant (*fēnglǐshù* 鳳梨树) takes advantage of the homophone that means “profit” (*lì* 利) to give it additional auspicious symbolism. Furthermore, in Hokkien, a southern Chinese dialect, *huánglí* (the same *huánglí* that means “yellow pears” but is also sometimes used to mean “pineapple”) is pronounced *onglai*, which resembles “the arrival of good luck” These are all good reasons why pineapples figure so prominently around the Chinese Lunar New Year and in New Year folk art, especially in southern China and Singapore (Fig. [99](#)).

## POMEGRANATE

Due to the proliferation of seeds in pomegranates (*Punica granatum*), fecundity and offspring are simulated visually, but there is word play at work here too (Figs. [101-105](#)). The word pomegranate (*shíliú* 石榴) is homophonous with the *shì* (世) that means "generation(s)" which reinforces the visual suggestion of generations of offspring. It is for this reason that pillowcases embroidered with pomegranates are given as wedding gifts.<sup>[42](#)</sup>

When pomegranates are combined with butterflies (*dié* 蝶), the rebus depicts the blessing of "repeated" (*dié* 叠) descendants. When combined with citrons (*xiāngyuán* 香橼), which sounds like "continuously coming first," the meaning is "May you have many sons who will continuously come first [in the civil service examinations]"<sup>[43](#)</sup> that is, be successful.

A spray of pomegranates in the mouth of a toad is a wish for children for familial longevity (see TOAD p. [104](#)).



Fig. 101 A pair of pomegranates, one open to reveal its seeds. Detail from the back of a pair of nineteenth-century *yúmù* (elm) chairs from Shaanxi.



Fig. 102 Carved wooden pomegranates decorate a Buddhist temple in Shanghai.



Fig. 103 The seeds of a pomegranate attract a bird. Modern Chinese watercolor.



Fig. 104 Pomegranates growing in a Yunnan farmhouse courtyard.



Fig. 105 This open pomegranate reveals the secret to its symbolism – hundreds of tiny seeds representing abundant offspring. Not only are the seeds red, an auspicious color, but the name “pomegranate” (*shíliú*) is also homophonous with another *shì* that means “offspring.”

A picture of an official’s hat rising from a pomegranate resting in a boat with a jade belt means “the smooth handing down through generations of official positions” (see *HATS* p. [253](#)).

Pomegranates come into flower in Beijing during the fifth month of the lunar calendar and Chinese tradition dictated that they be arranged in a symmetrical manner with an earthenware fish jar with goldfish and oleanders – a common grouping in Chinese domestic paintings.

## POMELO

Another fruit that is strongly associated with the Chinese New Year is the pomelo (*yòu* 柚). The large yellow fruit is not only an auspicious color (yellow), evocative of gold, but is also homophonous with the verb “to have” (*yǒu* 有). Having pomelos in your home during Chinese New Year or serving up sweets or other foods on a plate depicting a pair of pomelos carries the promise of



abundance in the year to come. Pomelos sometimes appear in contemporary Chinese New Year still lifes.

## **PUMPKIN**

See GOURD p. [50](#).

## **RADISH**

See CABBAGE p. [47](#).

## **RICE**

Ubiquitous to Chinese and other Asian cultures, rice is an obvious subject in Chinese art (Fig. [106](#)). There exist several series of stylized horticultural pictures depicting the cultivation of rice (*mǐ* 米) and silkworms, known as the *Gēngzhītú* (耕织图, *Illustrations of Plowing and Weaving*). The original set of forty-five poems and pictures (twenty-one on rice cultivation and twenty-four on rearing silkworms), which was composed for the Southern Song court around 1145, was succeeded by a “new” set of forty-six pictures commissioned by the Kāngxī Emperor in 1696. Others followed. These standardized pictures have been copied countless times and can be found as either paintings or woodblock prints, engravings, reproduced on porcelain, etc.

For the meaning of a sheaf of grain or rice in the pincers of a crab, see CRAB p. [176](#). See also GRAIN p. [52](#).

The multi-bubbled surface you sometimes find on the outside of snuff bottles, ceremonial jade pieces, etc., consisting of many small finely raised dots, are all symbolic of grains of rice (see Fig. [193](#)). It is known in Chinese as the nipple nail pattern or *rǔdīngwén* (乳丁纹) and sometimes has symbolic meaning, for example, when coupled with objects denoting “family” or “home” to symbolize prosperity. See also Fig. [532](#).

## **SWEET POTATO**

There is a root vegetable known in Chinese as *dìguā* (地瓜), which is commonly translated as “sweet potato” but when depicted in a Chinese design seems more

pumpkin-like. No matter. All you need to know is that a picture of this vegetable with the evergreen plant known as Heavenly Bamboo (*tiānzhú* 天竹) gives us the components of “heaven” (*tiān* 天) and “earth’ (*dì* 地). A picture of these two together can thus be read as a representation of the popular Chinese expression *tiāncháng dìjiǔ* (天长地久), which means “as enduring as the universe” or “everlasting and unchanging.”

## TURNIP

See CABBAGE p. [47](#).

## WHEAT

See GRAIN p. [52](#).

Finally, there are found in Chinese art, magnificent **groupings of all manner of fruit**, both in and out of season, that would be impossible to assemble without hothouses, airfreight, and other artificial means (see, for example, Fig. [75](#)). These still life paintings combine a large variety of different fruit (peaches, finger citrons, *Glossy ganoderma*, lotus flowers, roots, to name a few) and are known by several names, but one of the most common is “Immortals congratulating longevity” (*qúnxiānzhù shòu* 群仙牛兄寿). While they all express abundant harvests of good fortune, these particular still lifes “break the limit of time and space consciously ... to express lucky meanings.”<sup>[44](#)</sup>



Fig. 106 A field of rice.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Sotheby's, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, auction catalogue, New York, March 23, 2004, item #80, pp. [45–6](#).
- <sup>2</sup> The examination system of China, inaugurated during the Sui Dynasty (CE 581–618) to create an “imperial autocracy” and used by the emperor during the Tang Dynasty (CE 618–906) “to suppress the power of the autocracy,” evolved throughout its 1,400-year existence. See Ichisada Miyazaki (trans. Conrad Schirokauer), *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1976. pp. [111–12](#)). Eventually, three tiers of examinations in the career-building examination process were instated, beginning with the provincial examinations (given in the years of the rat, hare, horse, and cock), followed by a round known as the metropolitan examinations (given in the years of the ox, dragon, sheep, and dog), culminating in the final palace or imperial examinations. The *jiěyuán* (解元) was the top scholar of the provincial examinations, the *huìyuán* (会元) the top scholar of the metropolitan examinations, and the *zhuàngyuán* (状元) the top candidate in the final imperial examinations that were presided over by the emperor himself.
- <sup>3</sup> Ni Yibin, “The Anatomy of Rebus in Chinese Decorative Arts,” *Oriental Art*, Vol. 49, No. 3, [2004], p. [21](#).
- <sup>4</sup> Which, interestingly enough, both belong to the same species of *Brassica campestris* (syn. *rapa*).
- <sup>5</sup> For example, in the writings of one of the Tang Dynasty poets, Dù Fǔ (杜甫). For a discussion of references to the flora of the Tang Dynasty and its symbolism, see D. L. McCullen, “Recollection without Tranquility: Du Fu, the Imperial Gardens and the State,” [www.ihp.sinica.edu.tw](http://www.ihp.sinica.edu.tw)
- <sup>6</sup> *Citrus chirocarpus*, also known as *Citrus medica* var. *sarcodactylis*. See Terese Tse Bartholomew, *Myths and Rebuses in Chinese Art*, exhibition pamphlet, California: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1988, p. [8](#).
- <sup>7</sup> C. A. S. Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives* (3rd edn, New York: Dover Publications, 1976, p. [51](#)) writes that it also symbolizes “wealth as it illustrates the gesture of grasping money.” The famous Qing Emperor Qiánlóng (乾隆) added his own verse and seal to the original manuscript while it was in his possession.
- <sup>8</sup> See the many examples in Sotheby's, *Emperor and Scholar*, auction catalogue, Hong Kong, April 25, 2004, among them items #206, #247, and #302.
- <sup>9</sup> Sotheby's, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, p. [71](#).
- <sup>10</sup> T. C. Lai (ed.), *Things Chinese*, Hong Kong: Swindon Book Company, 1971, p. [19](#).
- <sup>11</sup> See the entries on Fúxī (伏羲) and Nǚ wā (女媧) in Yang Xianrang and Yang Yang, *Chinese Folk Art*, Beijing: New World Press, 2000, p. [16](#).
- <sup>12</sup> Yang Lihui and An Deming, with Jessica Anderson Turner, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology, Handbooks of World Mythology*, Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2005, p. [45](#).

- [13](#) Regina Krah, “The Gourd of Long-Lasting Happiness and Prosperity: A New Departure for Porcelain Decoration in the Yuan Dynasty,” *Orientations*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2005, p. [108](#).
- [14](#) Wang Shixiang (trans. Hu Shiping and Yu Shuxun), *The Charms of the Gourd*, Hong Kong: Next Publication, 1993, p. [59](#).
- [15](#) *Ibid.*, p. [60](#).
- [16](#) Loretta H. Wang, *The Chinese Purse: Embroidered Purses of The Ch’ing Dynasty*, 2nd edn, Taipei, Taiwan: Hilit Publishing, 1991, p. [92](#). These gourd-shaped purses were also used for incense.
- [17](#) See, for example, Sotheby’s, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, lot #166, pp. [74–5](#).
- [18](#) Rose Kerr (ed.), *The T. T. Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art: Chinese Art and Design*, London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1991, p. [22](#).
- [19](#) Wang Shixiang, *The Charms of the Gourd*, p. [66](#).
- [20](#) *Ibid.*, p. [217](#).
- [21](#) Krah, “The Gourd of Long-Lasting Happiness and Prosperity,” p. [108](#).
- [22](#) Wong Hwei Lian and Szan Tan (eds.), *Power Dressing: Textiles for Rulers and Priests from the Chris Hall Collection*, exhibition catalogue, Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2006, p. 357.
- [23](#) The motif of gourds found special favor in Near Eastern markets, so a considerable amount of export blue-and-white ceramics, especially during the Ming Dynasty (ca. fifteenth century), carries this design.
- [24](#) As on the beautiful yellow Yōngzhèng (1723–35) bowl found in Sotheby’s, *Emperor and Scholar* (item #231), that depicts iron red bats each carrying a pale green double gourd suspended from a blue ribbon in their mouths. The same auction offered a highly unusual double gourd vase (item #235) decorated with swooping cranes amidst *língzhī*-shaped clouds with a similar longevity meaning.
- [25](#) I love this character for its naïve simplicity; it is a pictogram of one (一) mouth (口) under a roof and a field (田).
- [26](#) See the illustration in Scott Minick and Jiao Pink, *Arts and Crafts of China*, Singapore: Thames & Hudson, 1996, p. [82](#).
- [27](#) Sotheby’s, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, item #49, p. [30](#). There is a wonderful water dropper in the shape of a rat nestled in a grape leaf dating from the Kāngxī Period (CE 1662–1722) in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.
- [28](#) Ye Yingsui, Ye Shuqin, and Ye Duyi, *Auspicious Designs of China*, Beijing: China Travel & Tourism Press, 2002, p. [46](#).
- [29](#) Patricia Bjaaland Welch, *Chinese New Year*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. [35](#).
- [30](#) Schuyler Cammann, *Substance and Symbol in Chinese Toggles: Chinese Belt Toggles from the C. F. Bieber Collection*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962, p. [115](#).
- [31](#) See, for example, entries in both Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, and Wolfram Eberhard (trans. G. L. Campbell), *Times Dictionary of Chinese Symbols: An Essential Guide to the Hidden Symbols in Chinese Art, Customs and Beliefs*, Singapore: Federal Publications, 1990.

- [32](#) “Tangerine” should apply only to the fruit grown in Africa (and now the US) that is more reddish in color, of the Mandarin variety, as the name “tangerine” comes from Tangier in Morocco. Modern Chinese dictionaries often translate “tangerine” as “red orange” (*hóngjú* 红桔). See Welch, *Chinese New Year*, pp. [12–17](#).
- [33](#) Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, p. [44](#).
- [34](#) Werner Speiser, *The Art of China: Spirit and Society*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1966, p. [209](#).
- [35](#) Quoted by James F. Cahill in “Confucian Elements in the Theory of Painting,” in Arthur F. Wright (ed.), *The Confucian Persuasion*, Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, p. 352.
- [36](#) Peaches have sexual imagery as well, although to my knowledge these are not represented in Chinese art, for example, peaches are used to describe female genitals, and the expression “going into the peach garden” was a reference to sexual intercourse. Successful male philanderers were said to have “peach flower luck.”
- [37](#) An example of such a snuff bottle can be found in Raymond Li, *A Glossary of Chinese Snuff Bottle Rebus: Re-discovering the Hidden Internal Beauty in Snuff Bottles*, Hong Kong: Nine Dragons, 1976, p. [45](#).
- [38](#) Artist Ying Ying Zhu, as exhibited in “Chinese Art in Transition” at the City Gallery, New York City, August 1987. Michael Brenson, “Art: Works by 12 Chinese-Americans in Show,” *The New York Times*, August 28, 1987. We do not know, however, why this particular combination was chosen by the artist. Pears are far more referenced in Chinese performance art, as Chinese legend credits the founding of a college of music by a Tang Dynasty emperor (which one is still disputed) in a pear orchard. Chinese opera performers are still referred to as “brethren of the pear orchard” (*líyuán zǐdì* 梨园子弟) in Chinese.
- [39](#) Peter Valder, *The Garden Plants of China*, Rozelle, New South Wales: Florilegium, 1999, p. 281.
- [40](#) Because *língzhī*’s curved, woody form resembles that of a scepter (denoting nobility and rank, the *rúyì*), the meaning of the fungus has been extended to share the same symbolic meaning as the scepter, and thus is used to represent the *rúyì* expression “according to your wishes.”
- [41](#) The question of why there are six persimmons was answered in a letter from Mary Ginsberg of the British Museum. She very kindly shared with me part of a letter written by the donor of the scroll, Gordon Barrass: “Huang [the artist Huang Miaozi, who had emigrated to Australia after the Cultural Revolution] had no difficulty keeping abreast of the latest developments in China, where Deng Xiaoping’s reforms were not only creating new opportunities, but also reviving old envies. In the spring of 1994 the antics of one of the magpies in Huang’s garden prompted in him a satirical reflection on this situation. The magpie seemed unable to determine which of the many persimmons it wanted to peck at. Huang immediately related this to the large number of Chinese intellectuals who seemed unable to make up their minds whether to remain true scholars or seek profit from the economic reforms.” I believe that six persimmons were painted (rather than three or four) because of the similarity of the number six (*liù* 六) with the word *lù* (禄) that means “an official’s salary in feudal China” or an emolument. Correspondence with Mary Ginsberg, British Museum, November 28, 2005.
- [42](#) Roberta Helmer Stalberg and Ruth Nesi, *China’s Crafts: The Story of How They’re Made and What They Mean*, New York: Eurasia Press, 1980, p. [47](#).
- [43](#) Teresa Tse Bartholomew, *Hidden Meanings: Symbols in Chinese Art*, exhibition press release, California: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 2006, p. [3](#).



44 段建华, 中国吉祥装饰设计 [Duàn Jiànhuá, *Chinese Auspicious Decoration Design*], 北京: 中国轻工业出版社 [May 1, 1999], p. 64.



Fig. 107 A “mineral tree” featuring coral and turquoise decorates a room in the Forbidden City, Beijing.

## Chapter 3

# MINERALS

The stonecutters of China were once kept busy fashioning precious and semiprecious minerals into the numerous pieces of jewelry, accessories, and other artifacts required by the imperial court and its officials. Today, the only reminder of this busy trade are the carvings found in the crafts sections of every Chinese department store. The same skill that fashioned agate into the delicate flower blossoms for an empress' or concubine's hairpin, today fashions petals for more politically correct “mineral trees” (still life “trees” formed of mineral or glass components, usually wired together and “planted” in cloisonné planters) (Fig. [107](#)).<sup>1</sup>

Throughout Chinese history, precious stones and minerals have had a distinct hierarchy, which has enabled identification of their owners' ranks. For example, the jewels or buttons worn on the top of officials' hats during the Qing Dynasty (CE 1644–1911) identified the status of the wearer: first rank, ruby; second rank, coral; third rank, sapphire; fourth rank, lapis lazuli; fifth rank, rock crystal (quartz); sixth rank, tridacna (white) shell; seventh rank, gold; eighth rank, gold with incised inscriptions; ninth rank, gold with relief inscriptions. When used for ornamentation, however, the choice of stones was based on aesthetic or symbolic similarities.

## AGATE

Particularly popular in Suzhou were “toggles of carved agate in the shape of dates, chestnuts, and peanuts, a rebus for ‘early sons’.”<sup>2</sup> This was due to the objects portrayed, however, rather than the substance used, as dates (*zǎo* 枣) are a rebus for “soon” (*zǎo* 早) and nuts (*zǐ*) are puns on “sons” as well as symbols of fertility.

## AMBER

Chinese legend declares that a dead tiger's heart reappears in time fossilized into

amber (*hǔpò* 琥珀), in reality the fossilized resin of pine trees. Not only does amber, with its caramel colors, share a resemblance to what a fossilized tiger's heart might look like, it also shares a homophone with the word “tiger” (*hǔ* 虎). Hence, amber is understood to embody and symbolize courage. But amber is also revered because of its association with pine trees, and hence longevity. “It is said that the Western Han Empress, Chao Feiyen [Zhào Fēiyān 赵飞燕], regularly slept on a solid amber pillow, benefiting from its protective properties and enamoured by the gentle fragrance that it emitted when warm.”<sup>3</sup> Because amber was not easily found and was often imported (originally, from Burma and the Baltic region), it was very expensive and highly prized.

## CINNABAR

The mineral cinnabar (*zhū* or *zhūshā* 朱砂), a reddish mercuric sulfide known by the chemical term HgS, the principal ore of mercury, is best known in Chinese art as the substance that is added to Chinese lacquer to give it its distinctive red color, associated with good luck (Fig. 108). Such lacquer boxes and vases were especially popular during the Ming and Qing Dynasties and usually exhibit very detailed, carved auspicious symbols.<sup>4</sup>

## CORAL

Red coral (*shānhú* 珊瑚) is highly revered throughout Asia and was originally imported to China from Iran and Sri Lanka. Amber and coral were amongst the most valued of the goods that were carried across the Silk Road to Chang'an, destined for the imperial court. The Chinese have always associated red coral with auspiciousness and longevity because of its color and its resemblance to deer antlers (so by association, virtue, long life, and high rank) (Fig. 109). A red coral button (see Fig. 500) was one of the official insignia of a top-ranking official in the imperial court, hence coral was colloquially referred to as “the red [hat] button” (*hóngdǐng* 红顶). Coral thus represents high rank and nobility and often accompanies other items that signal rank, such as peacock feathers. If coral is depicted in a vase with a swastika motif, the motif represents “10,000 virtues.”



(See also COLORS p. [218](#).)

Fig. 108 A red lacquer snuff bottle features a scene of an old man resting by a pine tree. At his feet appears to be a duck or goose while a small child or servant waits by a large rock. The presence of the goose may identify the figure as the famous fourth-century calligrapher Wáng Xizhī.



Fig. 109 A carving of a young boy in coral. The wooden stand is decorated with stylized pine branches. Courtesy of Béatrix Daydé-Latham.





Fig. 110 The branching coral detail on this textile design is accompanied by two “wishing jewels” or “pearls” (*b āozhū*, the red and blue circles to the right of the coral) and a “longevity stone” to the left. Courtesy of the Chris Hall Collection Trust (on loan to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore).



Fig. 111 Rock crystal, prized for its purity and clarity, is a perfect medium for a carving of a Buddha. This is most likely a depiction of Ratnasambhava (known in Chinese as Bǎoshēng), who is usually depicted in Tibet and southwest China holding a jewel in his left hand and forming the gift-giving *mudra* with his right.





Fig. 112 A rare spinach green jade chrysanthemum-shaped dish. Such dishes were very popular in pre-Republican China where the chrysanthemum symbolized intellectual pursuits and was also regarded as the flower of immortality. Courtesy of Sotheby's.

Coral in a natural tree-like form is commonly seen as a motif amongst waves in Chinese textile designs, together with other precious objects (see Fig. [146](#)), most commonly in the pattern known as “eight treasures and smooth water” (*bābǎo píngshuǐ* 八宝平水) (Fig. [110](#)). Mahayana Buddhism uses coral as a symbol of nobility. Coral was especially popular during the time of the great Chinese Emperor Kāngxī (r. 1661–1722), and we have several examples of late Qing Dynasty rank badges that employed concentric circles of small coral beads to represent the sun rather than the more usual embroidered gold disks.

Because of its color, coral was also much favored to represent the bodies of bats and butterflies in antique Chinese jewelry. Antique red coral beads (and other objects made from coral) are still highly prized throughout the Chinese and Himalayan world, particularly in Bhutan and Tibet.

## CRYSTAL

The word crystal (*shuǐjīng* 水晶) is composed of two characters, the first (*shuǐ* 水) meaning “water” and the second (*jīng* 晶) “brilliant.” Rock crystal is also known as *shuǐyù* (水玉) or “water jade.” Crystal has long been prized in China for its purity and clarity, qualities that made it popular among the literati of Imperial China with their respect for learning and uprightness (Fig. [111](#)). Snuff bottles, calligraphy accessories, official hat finials and buttons, and chops can all be found made of beautifully carved crystal. Large pieces of uncarved crystal were also collected as works of art in themselves.

## GOLD INGOTS

Gold ingots (*dìng* 錠) and a *rúyì* scepter together should be read as “May it surely be according to your wishes,” as the meaning of *rúyì* is “according to your wishes” and the *dìng* is a pun for the *dìng* in *yīdìng* (一定) that means “surely” or “certainly.” For other double meanings associated with gold, see GOLDFISH p. [98](#) and COINS p. [250](#). See also Figs. [578](#), [579](#).

## JADE

Jade (*yù* 玉) is the most precious of all stones to the Chinese and symbolizes purity and excellence.<sup>5</sup> To the Chinese, jade is also “the most perfect development of the masculine principle in nature” (Fig. 112).<sup>6</sup> It is so highly valued as the “concrete expression of both earthly and spiritual power” that even human virtues are described in terms of jade.<sup>7</sup> A Confucian text dating back to the third century explains the role jade played as a symbol of the virtues: “Its gentle, smooth, glossy appearance suggests *charity of heart*; its fine close texture and hardness suggests *duty to one’s neighbour*; it hangs down as though sinking suggesting *ceremony*; struck, it gives a clear note, long drawn out, dying gradually away and suggesting *music*; its flaws do not hide its excellences, nor do its excellences hide its flaws, suggesting *loyalty*; it gains our confidence suggesting *truth*; its spirituality is like the bright rainbow, suggesting the heavens above; its energy is manifested in hill and stream, suggesting the earth below; as articles of regalia it suggests the exemplification of that than which there is nothing in the world of equal value, and therefore is – DAO itself.”<sup>8</sup>

Throughout history, the Chinese have used jade for carving everything from ritual artifacts to utilitarian objects such as wine cups (Fig. 113), the top gems of girdle ornaments (known as *héng* 衡), weapons, and such decorative accessories as hairpins and the rank buttons on court hats (jade was used by sixth-rank civil mandarins).

Jade was sacred to the ancient Chinese, and some of the oldest symbols of sovereignty and court ritual (for example, investitures) in China are jade implements. Six ancient jade objects used ritualistically in ancient China (known as the six “auspicious” *ruì* 端 jades) are listed in the *Zhōu Yì* (周易), which attempts to describe the practices of early Zhou times, ca. 1000 BCE). All were made of jade: the *bì* (璧), *cóng* (琮), *guī* (圭), *chāng* (璋), *hú* (琥), and *huáng* (璜).<sup>9</sup> How these objects were actually used still eludes historians and sinologists. They are, however, associated with directions, the basic elements, and colors (see table p. 63), and are depicted separately or in groups.

The heavens themselves, according to the *Book of Changes*, are comprised of “jade and gold.”<sup>10</sup>

Jade was also used for burial rituals in ancient China because the people

believed that jade, with all its magical protective powers derived from its strong *yáng* forces, could guarantee preservation and hence immortality. Touring many museums are examples of the ancient Chinese funerary suits made of small jade squares that have been recently excavated.

Over time, jade lost some of its sacred nature, although it has always been regarded as special. Jade is routinely depicted in collections of treasures accumulating at the feet of the God of Wealth and his associates in New Year pictures. Deemed especially worthy is the carving of auspicious scenes or figures in jade. The wearing of jade by commoners was forbidden in Imperial China and jade only became an ornament of anyone who could afford it after the fall of the Manchu (Qing) Dynasty and the establishment of the Republican era in 1912. The Chinese still believe that the wearing of jade jewelry and amulets ensures good health and protects the wearer.



Fig. 113 A pair of delicate moss green jade summer tea or wine cups. We know they were meant for summer use because the rims are slightly flared. Jade was, and still is, highly prized in China where it symbolizes purity and excellence.

The word *yù* (玉) was used liberally in pre-modern China to mean “precious,” and the manufacture of any object in jade immediately gives it more virtual and perceived value, whether it be a scholar’s wrist support or a carving. For example, Jade Hare (*yùtù* 玉兔) was a literary reference to the moon; Jade Hall (*yùtáng* 玉堂) a reference to the famous Hanlin Academy where scholars pondered interpretations of the Confucian classics. A literal reference to a handsome or talented young man was a “tree of jade” (*yùshù* 玉树). The expression “acquiring a fine piece of jade” was sometimes used to recognize the birth of a son, and the gift of a linked chain of jade was understood to be a token of lasting friendship.<sup>11</sup> A “jade heart” (*yùxīn* 玉心) was a literary reference to a

“pure heart.”

Sometimes, if there is no other means in a painting of identifying the season (although this is usually easily recognized by the flowers depicted in such scenes), it can be ascertained by looking at the personal ornaments or ornate hairpins of noble women in the picture. Jade hairpins were used in the spring and summer, and gold in the fall and winter; women changed their hairpins when men ritually changed their “cool” and “warm” court hats – the dates of which were set by Imperial China’s Ministry of Rites.<sup>12</sup>

The term “jade” is still used for a variety of semiprecious stones, for example, *shuǐyù* (水玉), a word for quartz crystal, means literally “water jade,” while *huángyù* (黄玉) or “yellow jade” is topaz.

## PEARLS

Pearls (*bǎozhū* 宝珠), which symbolize good fortune in the form of wealth, are considered auspicious and have adorned Chinese clothing and all manner of accessories from the earliest of times. “The Chinese believed that pearls embodied the *yīn* essence of the moon, and like the Indians believed that pearls protected against fire as the *yáng* essence of the sun.”<sup>13</sup> The beauty of Hé Xiānggū (何仙姑, the only female in the group known as the Eight Immortals), is attributed to her diet of moonbeams and powdered mother-of-pearl.

While a pearl is one of the Eight Precious Things (*bābǎo* 八宝) that repeatedly appears in textiles, rank badges, and other articles (see p. 228), it evolved into a talismanic or flaming jewel by the mid-Qing. Its popularity as a symbol of wealth and success makes it one of the most common good luck symbols tucked into the waves of Qing Dynasty rank badges and dragon robes (it is easier to identify them tucked amongst the waves once we understand them to be “jewels,” as more often than not they are not alone but stacked in groups in shades of red, pink, blue, and yellow). See dragon p. 121.

During the Qing Dynasty, pearls were one of the most common beads worn at court. Men traditionally wore a single strand while the empress and noblewomen wore three strands, two of which were slung across the chest bandolier fashion (over the right shoulder then under the left arm; over the left shoulder and under the right arm). For more on court jewelry, see p. 257 and Figs. 596, 597.

## The Six Auspicious Jade Implements

<i>bì</i> (璧)	<i>cóng</i> (琮)	<i>guī</i> (圭)	<i>chāng</i> (璋)	<i>hú</i> (琥)	<i>huáng</i> (璜)
wide flat disk with a proportionately smaller hole in the middle	hollow, open at each end, square within a circle shape	elongated pointed tablet to be held in the hands by ancient rulers	rod with a jointed end	tiger-shaped	ornament of semicircular shape hung from a belt
heaven	earth	wood	fire	metal	water
heaven	earth	east	south	west	north
blue-green	yellow	green	red	white	black



Fig. 114 Interesting rocks were collected as early as the Tang Dynasty, to be admired in their own right, but also to be used in real and miniature gardens.



Fig. 115 A rock garden at the northern side of Beijing's Forbidden City. Courtesy of Elfi Chandra.

## ROCKS AND STONES



Interesting rocks (“strange stones” known as *guàishí* 怪石) were collected as early as the Tang Dynasty (618–906), a practice that was firmly established by the Song (960–1279). China’s educated élite collected these small rocks or stones, sometimes giving them a utilitarian purpose as brush rests or paperweights, but more frequently admiring them simply as objects of beauty (Figs. 114, 115). “Like a landscape painting, the rock represented a microcosm of the universe on which the scholar could meditate within the confines of a garden or studio. More than anything else, however, it was the abstract, formal qualities of the rocks that appealed to the Chinese literati; in that light, the taste for rocks finds kinship in the taste for calligraphy ... ultimately appreciated for the beauty of its form and texture.”<sup>14</sup> On close examination, you will often find such stones in the paintings of scholars’ studies.

The most valued rocks and stones were those that resembled sacred mountains or which were believed to embody inner energies (Fig. 116). Many of the larger rocks or stones found in Chinese paintings, gardens, still lifes, and floral arrangements are “longevity stones” (*shòushí* 寿石), but not all (Figs. 117, 118). Ornamental rocks were classified according to their characteristics and attributes so there are also, for example, “elegant stones” (*yǎshí* 雅石) and “rare [odd] stones” (*qīshí* 蹊石). Stones originating from special locations also went through periods of vogue, so while stones dredged from the bottom of Lake Dongting were popular during the Tang, Song collectors turned to stones from Lingbi.<sup>15</sup> Boulders from the shores of Lake Tai (known as *tàihúshí* 太湖石) in Jiangsu Province were especially popular with rock garden designers due to their unusual weathering. Stone collecting was a serious field of study in Imperial China, and “an elementary understanding of stone lore was considered basic knowledge for any educated person.”<sup>16</sup> Amongst famous stone collectors were the Emperor Huīzōng (徽宗, r. 1101–26) and the Song Dynasty poet and statesman Sū Dōngpō (苏东坡, 1036–1101), mentioned elsewhere in this book.

An arrangement consisting of a longevity stone, a narcissus, and bamboo is a traditional birthday arrangement in Chinese floral art, the longevity stone (*shòushí* 寿石) representing “longevity,” the bamboo (*zhú* 竹) homophonous with another *zhù* (祝) that means “wish,” and the narcissus (*shuǐxiān* 水仙) adding the concept of “immortality” from its association with the Eight Immortals. The appearance of moss on a longevity stone intensifies the idea of seniority (*tài* 太), as liver mosses are known as *tái* (苔).

For the interpretation of a longevity stone with day lilies, see DAY LILY, p. [26](#).



Fig. 116 A tiger, renowned for its strength and courage, stands on stylized longevity stones in this Tibetan rug, combining the forces of both.



Fig. 117 Tucked into a corner of Shanghai's famous Yu Garden (The Garden of Leisurely Repose), is the perfect example of a boulder demanding contemplation. The garden is said to have been built in 1559 by a filial son to give his parents pleasure in their old age.



Fig. 118 Close-up of an interior garden of Shanghai's Yu Garden known as the Chamber of 10,000 Flowers (Wànhuālóu), which incorporates a number of unusual boulders.

## SILVER

Although one of the Five Basic Metals (gold, silver, bronze, lead, and iron), silver (*yín* 银 or *báiyín* 白银) was always regarded as a more modest and inexpensive metal compared with gold. Because it was more affordable, it was a popular medium for small art objects, including religious statuary and plateware, and hence there is a profusion of personal grooming sets, locks, amulets, collars, neck rings, charms, and other decorative items made of silver, both plain and gilt (Fig. [119](#)).<sup>17</sup>

Silver jewelry was worn during the mourning period in China when most jewelry was to be removed (still the modern custom). This is a time when no jade, diamonds, or gold are to be worn.



Fig. 119 Silver was always regarded as a more modest and inexpensive metal and thus was popular amongst the masses for personal grooming sets, locks, amulets, collars, neck rings, charms, and other decorative everyday items.

## Footnotes

- [1](#) For an unusually large collection of Chinese “mineral trees” dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, visit the historic 1905 Beaux-Arts mansion known as Anderson House (2118 Massachusetts Avenue) in Washington DC that was the home of Ambassador Larz Anderson and his wife Isabel. Unfortunately, part of the collection was sold in the late 1990s but a significant number remain.
- [2](#) Teresa Tse Bartholomew, *Myths and Rebuses in Chinese Art*, exhibition pamphlet, California: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1988, p. [11](#).
- [3](#) Scott Minick and Jiao Ping, *Arts and Crafts of China*, Singapore: Thames & Hudson, 1996, p. [21](#). This was the infamous empress (c. BCE 32–1?) known as the “Flying Swallow” for her slim appearance and captivating dances.
- [4](#) Cinnabar was additionally used in ancient China as a medicinal substance known as *xiāndān* 仙丹), believed to prolong life. It did not work.
- [5](#) The term *yù* (玉) was originally understood to include a vast array of minerals, including agate and quartz, nephrite and jadeite, but of the latter two, only nephrite, also known as “soft jade,” was indigenous to China. “Hard jade” or jadeite (*fěicuì* 翡翠) was first imported into China from Burma during the Qing Dynasty.
- [6](#) Jonathan Chamberlain, *Chinese Gods*, Hong Kong: Long Island Publishers, 1983, p. [90](#).
- [7](#) Jessica Rawson, *Chinese Jade: From the Neolithic to the Qing*, London: British Museum Press, 1995, p. [13](#).
- [8](#) Herbert Giles (ed.), *Gems of Chinese Literature*, New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1965, p. [98](#). Although this text, first published in 1884, was attributed to Confucius by its purported “discoverer”

Wáng Sù (王肃, CE 195–256), the discoverer, transcriber, or perhaps even author of an early Han Dynasty collection of Confucian parables known as the “School Sayings of Confucius” (*Kǒngzǐ jiāyǔ* 孔子家语), it was more likely written by Wáng Sù himself, who was an admirer of the sage.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Stanley Charles Nott, *Chinese Jade Throughout the Ages: A Review of Its Characteristics, Decoration, Folklore and Symbolism*, London: B. T. Batsford, 1936, pp. [17](#) ff.

<sup>10</sup> Best known as the *I Ching* but in Pinyin as the *Yijing* (易经).

<sup>11</sup> Nott, *Chinese Jade*, p. [6](#).

<sup>12</sup> Ornaments can also help date paintings. For example, Soame Jenyns in *A Background to Chinese Painting*, New York: Schocken Books, 1966, p. [151](#), reports that “the ladies of the Han period [wore] jade plugs in the[ir] ears.” Hairstyles and clothing are other clues to be studied by those interested in Chinese art.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, London: Serindia Publications, n.d., p. [209](#).

<sup>14</sup> *Rocks, Mountains, Landscapes, and Gardens: The Essence of East Asian Painting*, exhibition catalogue, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> For an interesting article on the spirit stones of China, see Stephen Little, “Spirit Stones of China: The Ian and Susan Wilson Collection,” *Oriental Art* Vol. 30, No. 5, 1999, pp. [32-9](#).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. [34](#).

<sup>17</sup> See Margaret Duda’s *Four Centuries of Silver: Personal Adornment in the Qing Dynasty and After*, Singapore: Times Editions, 2002, for a comprehensive discussion of this subject. She and her husband Paul Duda have also included a wealth of photographs, making this volume an excellent introduction to the subject.





Fig. 120 A pair of quails represents “peace and prosperity.” Nine quails represent the sentiment “eternal peace.” These quails, depicted with flowers and standing grain, also provide us with the rebus *ānhé* that can be interpreted as “peace and harmony.” Detail from a modern lacquer cabinet.

## Chapter 4

# REAL AND IMAGINARY BIRDS

Traditional Chinese thought, which believed all things should conform to groups of five, categorized animals into five classes: animals with feathers, animals with hair, animals with shells, animals with scales, and naked animals (which included man). In this book, the following, slightly different categories are followed: real and imaginary birds; insects, reptiles, fish, and amphibians; real and imaginary animals; and mortal and religious beings. Each was, and still is, a rich source of inspiration for both ancient and contemporary Chinese art (Fig. [121](#)).

It should be noted that in Chinese art any pair of living animals or birds of approximately the same size is generally understood to represent male and female, or a couple (be they goldfish, ducks, dragons, or deer) in a state of conjugal fidelity, an essential foundation of a well-ordered Confucian society. A larger– smaller pairing of animals, usually elephants or lions, can be interpreted as representing a senior–junior relationship.

The oldest animals found in Chinese art and “used to the exclusion of almost all others [were]: dragons, birds, deer, lions and fish.”<sup>1</sup> Birds (geese, falcons, peacocks, and phoenixes) have been popular textile motifs for at least 2,000 years, often appearing in pairs, face-to-face, in a design known as “confronting birds.” These pairs often appeared in roundels, at times with borders of small white circles typically described as “pearls.” In addition to their ornamental use, bird motifs were almost certainly included to indicate rank or social standing.<sup>2</sup> Bird feathers were also highly prized ornaments and accessories. During the Tang Dynasty (CE 618–907), a type of skirt decorated with birds’ feathers, known as “the hundred bird feather skirt,” was so popular amongst the upper and middle classes that it was eventually banned due to the endangerment of so many rare birds.<sup>3</sup>

Because of their importance on older textiles, during the Ming Dynasty (CE 1368–1644) birds came to be used on embroidered square patches (see, for example, Figs. [43](#), [137](#), [146](#)) known as *huāyàng* 花样, and in the Qing (CE 1644–1911) as *bǔ zi* 补子,<sup>4</sup> but more commonly known in the West as “mandarin squares,” to demarcate the nine official ranks of civil officials of the imperial Court. The emperor’s badge, together with those of the heir apparent and other

males of the imperial family, was round in shape to represent heaven (in the Chinese world, the emperor was the “Son of Heaven”), while the remaining court badges were square to represent earth. These squares were made in pairs (see, for example, Figs. 9 and 192), one for the front and one for the back of the regulation plain outer surcoat known as a *bǔfú* (补服). These surcoats were bright red during the Ming Dynasty, as red was the official dynastic color, and a dark navy blue during the Qing. The badges were positioned in such a way that during court functions, when civil officials stood on the emperor’s left, the birds would all be facing him.

### Rank Insignia for Civil Officials of the Imperial Court

	Early Ming Dynasty (1391-1527)	Late Ming Dynasty (1527-1644)	Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)
First rank	crane or	crane	crane
Second rank	golden pheasant	golden pheasant	golden pheasant
Third rank	peacock or	peacock	peacock
Fourth rank	wild goose	wild goose	wild goose
Fifth rank	silver pheasant	silver pheasant	silver pheasant
Sixth rank	egret or	egret	egret
Seventh rank	mandarin duck	mandarin duck	mandarin duck
Eighth rank	oriole, quail, or	oriole	quail
Ninth rank	paradise flycatcher	quail	paradise flycatcher
Unclassified		paradise flycatcher	



Fig. 121 A contemporary lantern of a bird for use during the Mid-Autumn or Moon Festival, celebrated on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month of the Chinese calendar when families sit out late in the



evening to gaze at the moon. Children traditionally carry gaily decorated lanterns of animals to light their way. The small wire at the bottom holds a candle, so when the bird is “opened up” and the wire raised, the candle sits inside the form, illuminating it.

During the Ming, when the designs were less regulated, one would find varying portrayals of the designated bird and background (such as two birds in flight, or one in flight, the other standing). During the Qing, the mandated arrangement was a single bird perched on one clawed foot (whether a webbed-footed bird or not), with spread wings against landscapes that became increasingly busy over time, consisting of clouds, rocks, and waves to symbolize the universe and later including such “good luck” symbols as swastikas, bats, and jewels. A red disk would symbolize the emperor, towards whom the bird would be looking up at in reverent gaze (see Fig. [137](#)).

In traditional Chinese art, birds signal both the seasons and various attributes. Each month (or season) has its appropriate pairings of birds and flowers, for example, wild geese in the autumn and swallows in the spring (Fig. [122](#)). When listed according to the Chinese lunar calendar, the combinations are: first moon, stork and pine; second moon, cock and hen and peach; third moon, crow and peach; fourth moon, swallow and wisteria; fifth moon, cuckoo and iris; sixth moon, golden crow and bamboo; seventh moon, kingfisher and lotus; eighth moon, sparrow and rice; ninth moon, dragonfly and chrysanthemum; tenth moon, geese and marsh grass; eleventh moon, duck and chrysanthemum; twelfth moon, falcon and pine and wren.<sup>5</sup>

It was also the Chinese love of birds that resulted in the development of a special category of ceramics: birdcage accessories. During the Ming Dynasty, bird rearing became a popular imperial hobby and this resulted in some lovely smaller bowls and containers that served as holders of bird food and water inside the cages. Designs used for these bird feeders include peaches, gourds, joined pomegranates, and bamboo, with the expected decorations of fruit, flowers, and auspicious symbols, in other words, a miniature world of containers and vessels.

Individual birds are arranged below in alphabetical order, not in order of their frequency of occurrence in Chinese art.



Fig. 122 A contemporary snuff bottle depicting a classic combination of birds and flowers.

## ASIAN PARADISE FLYCATCHER

Male Asian Paradise Flycatchers are identified by their greatly elongated central pair of tail feathers, which can be up to 25 cm (10 inches) longer than the rest of their tail. They are known in Chinese as *shòudàiniǎo* (缓带鸟), which literally means “colored ribbon bird.” Because they were highly regarded, they appear on rank badges and other apparel as well as in Chinese art. When they appear in stylistic paintings of birds and flowers, known as *huāniǎo* (花鸟), they are usually a proxy for “long-lived or enduring generations,” as the first syllable *shòu* (缓) sounds like the “longevity” *shòu* (寿) and the second syllable *dài* (带) sounds like the *dài* (代) that means “generations.”

If the design you are deciphering depicts Asian Paradise Flycatchers with the



collector's stone known as *shòushì* (寿石), you are looking at the pictorial expression of a wish that “many generations [presumably of the recipient's family] will remain perpetually young into old age.” This time, the concept of longevity stemming from the Asian Paradise Flycatcher's name (*shòudàiniǎo* 缓带鸟) repeats in the name of the stone, *shòu* (寿), meaning “longevity.” If there are other flowers or elements in the picture, keep interpreting!

Although Asian Paradise Flycatchers are usually depicted on rank badges as white birds with either a round or crested head – traits borne by several other rank badge birds – they are easily identified by the single dot that appears in each of their two long tail feathers.

## CHINESE BULBUL

There is a small songbird commonly found in southern and central China as well as much of Southeast Asia that is known in English as the Chinese bulbul. Because this bird has a white patch on its head, its Chinese name is *báitóuwēng* (白头翁), literally “white-haired old man.” *Báitóu* (“white-headed”) is used colloquially in Chinese to refer to elderly people. These birds are thus employed in art to represent old age. Two bulbuls symbolize a married couple living into old age. If the birds are sitting in auspicious surroundings, such as peonies, then the scene is known as *fùguì báitóu* (富贵白头),<sup>6</sup> wishing them “long life in a state of status and success.” Other flowers in the picture add their respective meanings.

## COCK AND COCKEREL

See rooster p. [85](#).



Fig. 123 Crane heads. Detail from a modern Chinese screen. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.



Fig. 124 Cranes spread their wings amidst stylised *lingzhi* fungus, both symbols of longevity. The various colors of the fungus are meant to represent the Five Colors (red, yellow, black, blue/green, white), which denote all known things and the five directions.

## CRANE

Although the phoenix is the “king” of birds in Chinese art, the crane (*hè* 鹤) is the top-ranking or “number one” bird, symbolizing both status and longevity to the Chinese, who believe that cranes live for centuries (Fig. 123).<sup>7</sup> The theme of a crane, or pair of cranes, coupled with the character for longevity (Fig. 127), or a pine or cypress tree (symbols of longevity) and the sun is a popular design, and is a traditional Chinese New Year (first lunar month) painting. Look carefully, and

you may even spot a piece of the sacred woody fungus *língzhī* (灵芝) that grants longevity, or another longevity symbol such as a peach nearby, or in the crane's mouth (Figs. [124](#), [128](#)). This is also a popular design on gifts, scrolls, or cards containing birthday greetings for mature people, but is considered inappropriate for the young.

The depiction of a pine tree (*sōng* 松) and a crane (*hè* 鹤) is known as *sōng líng* *hè shòu* (松龄鹤寿) or “live as long as pine and crane” (Fig. [125](#)). A crane and pine together (*tóng* 同) in the spring (*chūn* 春) yields *sōng hè tóng chūn* (松鹤同春). This is often used as a wedding design to convey a wish that the newlyweds will “grow old (*xiáling* 遐龄) together remaining as young as spring (*chūn* 春)” (Fig. [126](#)). This design is therefore also known as *sōng hè xiáling* (松鹤遐龄). *Chūn* (春) also means “life” itself so the combination can also be understood as “growing old in life together.” Two cranes amidst pine, one poised in flight, the other standing, are a common variation.



Fig. 125 A pair of cranes amidst pine, to reinforce the message of longevity, decorates this architectural feature in a traditional Beijing residence. This motif is known as *sōng líng hè shòu* and represents the expression that the inhabitants may “live as long as pine and crane.”



Fig. 126 Detail from a modern Chinese scroll of two red-crowned cranes. Cranes are monogamous, mating for life.



Fig. 127 Two facing cranes form a circle with a stylized longevity character (*shòu*) at the base, surrounded by branching lotus. Early twentieth century Tibetan weaving, wool weft, cotton warp.



Fig. 128 This detail from a stone-inlaid *zītán* (a very rare, highly prized hardwood found only in Asia) brushpot features a flock of red-crowned cranes in a field of *língzhī* fungus. *Zītán* was reserved for the imperial family's use from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Courtesy of Tang Horse Pte Ltd, Singapore.

Cranes (*hè* 鹤) and lotus (*hé* 荷) together represent a wish for peace and harmony (*hé* 和), all being homophonous.

Because a crane was considered the top-ranking bird, it was used as Imperial China's highest demarcation of court status, and its appearance on the rank badge of an official's robe signaled that the wearer was a civil servant of the first, or highest, rank (see Fig. [43](#)). On such badges, a crane is identified by its round, smooth white head, often capped in red, and by its short and stubby differentiated tail feathers. The crane is usually depicted standing alone (*dúlì* 独

立, in other words, “peerless”) on one foot in a rising tide, which itself is a pun, as *cháo* means both “tide” (潮) and “government, dynasty, or having an audience with an emperor” (朝). Thus, a crane standing before the tide represents a top-ranking minister standing before his emperor. Similarly, a crane standing on a rock represented attaining the highest civil rank. Even the “standing alone” *dúlì* (独立) is a rebus for another *dúlì* (独力), which means “having attained something by one’s own efforts,” the reference being to the successful minister having attained his rank through his diligence at his studies, which enabled him to pass the civil service examinations.

A crane surrounded by peonies can be interpreted as *yīpǐn fùguì* (一品富贵), “May you be wealthy and prestigious with the top official rank.”<sup>8</sup>

Ascending cranes (the male in a pair, the female usually remains on the ground), represent the blessing *yīpǐn gāoshēng* (一品高升),<sup>9</sup> where the *yīpǐn* (number one [birds]) are depicted rising to a high position (*gāoshēng* 高升), but when “the figure of a crane with outspread wings and uplifted foot is ... used in a funeral procession, the idea [is that] the crane will convey the soul of the departed, riding on its back, to heaven.”<sup>10</sup>

In 2004, a particularly beautiful snuff bottle came up for auction. One side showed a crane (*hè* 鹤), heron, or egret (*lù* 鹭) flying high in the cloud-filled heavens (*tiān* 天) above the sea (*hǎi* 海), with an open floodgate, with a special tablet known as a “tally” (*chóu* 筹) in its beak. The other side featured bats (*fú* 蝠) and a pavilion (house= *wū* 屋) rising from the mouth of a swimming carp.<sup>11</sup> Sotheby’s experts interpreted this complex design as a rebus of the expression *hǎi wū tiānchóu* (海屋添筹), the conventional phrase used to express “Happy birthday” or “Many happy returns of the day” to an elderly person. Another Chinese scholar interprets it as a lucky pattern composed of both landscape and buildings: a crane, clouds, the fairyland in *Pénglái* (the famous island abode of the Immortals), and the Jade (or Jasper) Terrace (*Yáotái* 瑶台), another realm of the Immortals). Here, its meaning is “time brings great changes to the world and wishes [somebody] a long life,” but it was also used “to celebrate the completion of a new house. Its implied meaning is wishing the foundation firm.”<sup>12</sup> The former interpretation is the classical, accepted one.





Fig. 129 A pair of mandarin ducks nestles amidst flowering lotus and their seedpods representing marital constancy and fidelity as well as an harmonious pairing blessed with children. A homophone of “lotus” means “harmony.” Detail from a scroll. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

A single crane in a setting devoid of the more kitsch longevity symbols “symbolises the harmonious, timeless contentment of the recluse.”<sup>13</sup>

See also TORTOISE p. [106](#) for longevity symbols, and the combination of tortoise and crane.

## CROW

The Chinese crow (*wūyā* 乌鸦 or *jiāyā* 家牙鸟, also known as the “jet black one” *wūhēide* 乌黑的), is supposed to signify evil.<sup>14</sup> Crows are not common in Chinese art, but there is a famous scroll that depicts a crow and six persimmons in the British Museum. For its meaning, see PERSIMMON p. [56](#).

Crows are sometimes confused with ravens (*dù yā* 渡牙鸟, which translates

literally as “passage crow”). This is unfortunate as ravens are good luck birds in Chinese art. Ravens are four times bigger than crows and have a much larger wingspan. They also have curved bills with short tufts of hair on top. Crows have more or less flat bills and no tufts. Remember that the tuft signals “good luck” and you will never confuse the two again. See RAVEN p. [85](#).

## DOVE

The dove (gē 鸽) or **pigeon** in Chinese folk art represents longevity. During the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – CE 220), well-wishers would present a special ceremonial jade scepter (known as a “pigeon staff”), bearing a carved dove at one end, to their elders to wish them a long life. Doves, which are members of the pigeon family, are also regarded as faithful and filial, so a pair of doves represents lifelong fidelity, fertility, and longevity, and are thus still popular folk art subjects.[15](#)



Fig. 130 Ducks glide through a lily-rich pond in this primitive modern folk painting denoting prosperity and peace.

## DUCK

The depiction of ducks dates back at least to the Han Dynasty,<sup>[16](#)</sup> and mandarin ducks (*yuānyang* 鸳鸯) have been found as a motif amongst the embroidered textiles discovered in the famous Dunhuang Caves of Central Asia dating from

the Tang Dynasty.<sup>17</sup>

A pair of **mandarin ducks** or wild geese expresses peace, prosperity, and (marital) constancy and fidelity because of the belief that they mate for life and will die if separated (Fig. [129](#)). One young gentleman in *Flower Shadows behind the Curtain* (*Gé Lián Huā Yǐng* 隔帘花影), the sequel to the famous Chinese novel *Golden Lotus* (*Jīn Píng Méi* 金瓶梅), carries a “red silk handkerchief embroidered with two ducks locked in love.”<sup>18</sup> In real life, we know that Shah Jahan (r. 1628–56), the Mughal king who built the Taj Mahal for his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal, owned a large blue-and-white platter decorated with a central design of six large chrysanthemums and a pair of mandarin ducks swimming amid lotus.<sup>19</sup>

Ducks are usually depicted with lotus to symbolize a harmonious conjugal relationship (Fig. [130](#)) (see LOTUS p. [27](#)).

Sometimes the lotus is shown with two blossoms (literally *shuānghé* 双荷, a rarity in nature (see Fig. [138](#)) to underscore the message of harmony and union (*héhé* 和合). If the picture includes a lotus seedpod, the pod represents the additional wish for descendants (Fig. [131](#)). According to some sources, the addition of a frog in such a picture represents “riches,” but the riches most likely refer to tadpoles, that is, offspring<sup>20</sup> (see FROG p. [102](#)).

The alternative name for lotus (*lián* 莲) has a homophone (*liàn* 恋) which means “long for, feel attached to” that confirms the relationship that can exist between these birds that mate for life. Consequently, mandarin ducks are popular decorations on the household articles of newlyweds and are often found in conjunction with the characters for “double happiness” (囍) (see Fig. [486](#)).

Mandarin ducks depicted with peony blossoms denote the wish for a prosperous marriage.

Another more academic interpretation of a pair of ducks is dependent on knowing the character that is read as “duck” in Chinese. The radical (or left-hand part) of the character of “duck” (*yā* 鸭) is the radical *jiǎ* (甲), the same *jiǎ* that can mean “first” as in “first [in] class” or “the best.” Two ducks with a lotus (*lián* 莲) can thus also be a pun on the *lián* (连) that means “successively or one after another,” to be interpreted as *liánjiǎ* (连甲), “repeatedly being first,” for example, on the list for the district, provincial, and capital civil service examinations.<sup>21</sup> Another variant, two (*èr* 二) ducks and reeds, could similarly be read as “two ducks” (*èryā* 二鸭) or as a pun that means “second class” (*èrjiǎ* 二甲). If there are



reeds (*lú* 芦) in the picture, the signals are inconsistent because *lu* is a homophone of the *lù* (禄) that means an “official’s salary.” It has also been suggested that reeds form the base of another pun (*chuánlú* (传觚), which “can be the title of the first candidate in the second class of the successful candidates in the civil service examinations.”

It is the context of the rest of the design (are there “double happiness” signs or does the decoration appear on a snuff bottle?) that identifies the object as a newlywed’s or a scholar’s lucky charm. When interpreting Chinese motifs, you must always look for thematic coherence.

From 1391 to 1527, the crest-headed mandarin duck on a rank badge indicated a sixth-or seventh-rank civil servant, and a seventh-rank civil official thereafter until 1911, the end of the Qing Dynasty.



Fig. 131 A pair of ducks amidst flowering lotus, seedpods, and bullrushes decorate this terracotta decoration in Beijing’s Forbidden City.





Fig. 132 It is easy to see why eagles represent boldness in Chinese art, the word for “eagle” and “hawk” (*yīng*) being a homophone for “hero.” Detail from a scroll seen in a shop in Liulichang, Beijing.

## EAGLE

Birds of prey such as eagles, **falcons**, and **hawks** represent boldness in Chinese art, the word for “hawk” and “eagle” (*yīng* 鷹) also being a homophone for one of the two characters that comprise the word “hero” (*yīngxióng* 英雄) (Fig. 132). Their keen vision and swift response make them an appropriate and popular subject for sculptures and paintings installed in modern-day corporate headquarters, further accentuated by their homophonous relationship with a word that means “profit” (*yíng* 盈). A hawk or eagle (*yīng* 鷹) standing alone (*dúlì* 独立) – or on one leg – is a rebus for *yīngxióng dúlì*, “a hero stands alone, peerless.”<sup>23</sup> For the additional meaning of *dúlì*, see CRANE p. 69.

A hero does not necessarily have to be a military hero. There is a famous scroll from the second half of the fourteenth century (the Yuan) that depicts a hawk perched on a pine limb above a rocky precipice ignoring a pheasant standing directly below (Fig. 133). The meaning of the picture comes from a

poem on a similar hawk painting that “alludes to scholar-officials of the Yuan period who refused to serve the foreign Mongol rulers, rejecting the opportunity to make an easy living. The representation of the hawk in ink monochrome rather than color increases the likelihood that it symbolises the integrity of a principled Confucian scholar.”<sup>24</sup>

There is another famous hawk painting in the Palace Museum in Beijing, this one a reference to the power and legal right to the throne of the Emperor Yōngzhèng (雍正) who ruled from 1723 to 1735, the fourth son and successor of the famous Emperor Kāngxī (康熙, r. 1661– 1722). The scroll dates back to the second year of Yōngzhèng’s reign and is credited to the famous court painter, the Jesuit priest Giuseppe Castiglione. It was painted in honor of the emperor’s birthday and is entitled *Pine, Hawk and Glossy Ganoderma*. The focus of the painting is a majestic white hawk standing beneath a lofty pine tree with the famous longevity fungus dotting the landscape. There can be no doubt who the hawk is meant to represent.

In hunting cultures, the falcon is an especially admired bird. Sparrow hawks were also used for falconry (Fig. [134](#)). Textile patterns dating to the Tang Dynasty depict falcons holding ribbons, probably an early indicator of military status. Professor Zhao Feng of China’s National Silk Museum relates that in the Qing scholar Wàng Pǔ’s (王溥) compilation of knowledge of the Tang (*Táng Huìyào*, 唐会要), it is mentioned “that on the third month of Zhenyuan’s third year (787), diplomats were represented by falcons holding ribbons and officials known as *guānchá guān* [观察官], (literally “observing or watching official”).”<sup>25</sup> There are also references to falcon banners used in Chinese armies in the *Shī Jīng* (诗经), the *Book of Songs*, the earliest collection of Chinese poems, canonized during the Han Dynasty.<sup>26</sup>



Fig. 133 "Hawk on Pine Tree," Chinese, Yuan Dynasty, second half of the fourteenth century. Ink and color on silk. 145.8 x 75.8 cm. Keith McLeod Fund, 1996.2. Photograph © 2006 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.





Fig. 134 Close-up of a man holding a sparrow hawk in the Tang Dynasty tomb of Prince Yi Dé (難德), who was beaten to death at the age of nineteen in 701 with his younger sister at Empress W ŭ Zétian's order, reportedly for having criticized some of the empress's favorites.



Fig. 135 In Chinese art, egrets (*lù*) amidst lotus, as depicted on this terracotta plaque in Beijing's Forbidden City, represent the Confucian ideal of a virtuous (uncorrupt) official. The combination can also be interpreted as "repeated career success."

There are several examples in both textiles and jade of scenes where a falcon (*sǔn* 鵝, formerly known as *hú* 鵠) is pursuing one or more swans fleeing amongst

water plants. This motif commemorates the regular spring hunt by the Khitan peoples of the Liao Dynasty (CE 907–1125). “Formal celebrations of these hunts ... probably ... go back at least to the Han Dynasty.”<sup>27</sup> The Jurchens, another pastoral people who established the Jin Dynasty (CE 1115–1234), also loved hunting. Scenes portraying the various seasonal hunts can be found from this Period on a number of media. For example, the “swan chase” has a counterpart showing deer with tigers or bears; together the pair is known as *chūnshuǐ qiūshān* (春水秋山), literally “spring-water, autumn-mountain.”

Rawson notes that “if the dates in the Liao, Jin and Yuan that are given these [hunting scene] pieces is correct, they are among the very first examples of the use on jades of pictorial formulae to illustrate words and phrases ... to recall both a simple auspicious phrase and all the notions and activities brought to mind by the words.”<sup>28</sup>

Hunting motifs also exist on textiles. An excellent example can be seen, dating back to the Jin Empire, in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. It shows fleeing swans brocaded in gold thread in teardrop-shaped roundels (lotus buds?) on a green background.

The Mongols, who founded the Yuan Dynasty (CE 1280–1367), are probably the best known of China’s nomadic horse-men and hunters, and are immortalized in many wonderful paintings of their famous hunting expeditions. They began their assault on the Jin Empire in 1211, and it is likely that such fabrics, as described above, would have been part of the spoils of war that they found attractive.

## EGRET

“In the heron family (*Ardeidae*), the terms egret and **heron** are applied loosely” and the two names are used almost interchangeably.<sup>29</sup> In Chinese, both are known as *lù* (鹭). *Lù* (鹭) has a number of homophones, including “official’s salary” (*lù* 禄) and “road or path” (*lù* 路).

An egret amongst lotuses represents the Confucian ideal of a virtuous (uncorrupt) official (Fig. 135). It can also be interpreted as “repeated success along the way [of one’s career]” where the egret is a rebus for “road or path” (*lù* 路) and an “official’s salary” (*lù* 禄), and the lotus (*lián* 莲) a rebus for “repeatedly”



(*lián* 连).

Egrets and fish are an auspicious combination, as fish (*yú* 鱼) are homophonous with “abundant” (*yú* 余), so the two together symbolize an “official’s salary in abundance.”

Because egrets represented the ruling élite, they were also one of the birds used on the rank badges of Imperial China, representing a sixth-or seventh-rank civil servant from 1391 to 1527 and a sixth-rank civil servant thereafter until the fall of the Qing in 1911 (Fig. [137](#)). An egret on a rank badge can be identified by its wedge-shaped tail (like that of a duck), its white color, and either its smooth head with one or two feathers, or alternatively, a crested head, which is usually white or blue.

Hérons and egrets are smaller than storks and cranes and fly with their necks tucked into an “S” shape, unlike “cranes and storks which fly with their necks fully outstretched.”<sup>30</sup> See also STORK p. [87](#).

## FALCON

See EAGLE p. [73](#).

## GOOSE

Wild geese (*dà yàn* 大雁; domesticated geese are known as *é* 鵞) are found on some of the earliest textiles from Chinese tombs (see EAGLE p. [73](#)).

The wild goose, sometimes also called a “cloud goose,” was the bird used to identify third-and fourth-rank civil officials from 1391 to 1527 and fourth-rank officials after then until 1911. The wild goose lacks the ornamental flair of its higher-ranking colleagues (the crane, silver pheasant, and peacock), but was nevertheless well regarded by the military in China, who noted that many of its behavioral characteristics (such as the use of sentinels and flight formation) were not dissimilar to those of the military. Geese were thus considered a suitable gift for military leaders. On rank badges, they are identified by their light brown, tan, or mustard bodies, smooth head, short neck, and wedge-shaped tail. Do not look for webbed feet, as the Chinese abandoned the realistic feet of a goose, preferring instead stylized claws. The most distinguishing characteristic of geese on rank badges is a pair of small eyelash-shaped black marks stitched onto their backs.

Wild geese are also a popular design on writing paper because a wild goose

once figured as the hero of a Chinese legend by carrying a message from the imprisoned court official Sū Wǔ (蘇武, 140–60 BCE) back to the emperor.

A goose or geese in a picture with a man dressed as a scholar wearing a loose robe and cap and usually with a table and calligraphy brushes close by, will be a reference to the famous fourth-century calligrapher Wáng Xīzhī (王羲之, ca. 303–61)<sup>31</sup> (see Fig. [108](#)).

Like mandarin ducks, wild geese are believed (falsely) to mate for life by the Chinese, so a pair represents peace, prosperity, and marital fidelity, although mandarin ducks are the more common symbol. A live goose was once considered an appropriate addition to a young man's betrothal gifts to his intended.

A very common Chinese motif is a pair of geese in a winter scene, which was considered an appropriate subject for a couple who have passed many years together and are now in the “winter of their lives.” Sometimes magpies are included to seal the imagery into the commonly understood wish, “May you and your spouse live happily ever after.”

## **HAWK**

See EAGLE p. [73](#).

## **HEN**

See ROOSTER p. [85](#).

## **HERON**

See EGRET p. [74](#).



Fig. 136 A sole goose decorates this modern Chinese screen. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.



Fig. 137 The egret badge worn by this court official identifies him as a sixth-rank civil official. The square shape of the badge (earlier Ming badges were trapezoidal in shape) and the presence of a red sun, together with the dark navy blue robe, confirm the dating as Qing. Detail from an ancestor portrait. Courtesy of Béatrix Daydé-Latham.





Fig. 138 Magpies are easily identified by their white breasts and long dark tails. In this Chinese New Year poster, a pair of magpies (representing a happily married couple) sits high atop prunus blossoms, expressing a wish for “double good news,” since both the birds and the flowers represent impending good news. Moreover, since the birds are perched at the very top of the flowers, the meaning is “happiness up to the tips of one’s eyebrows.” Note also the mandarin ducks swimming at the base, representing marital fidelity and devotion, and the unusual double lotus (see p. [72](#)). Courtesy of the



## KINGFISHER

The iridescent blue feathers of the kingfisher (*cùiniǎo* 翠鸟) were once used by Chinese artisans to decorate hair and clothing accessories such as hairpins and brooches, thus giving rise to the kingfisher as a symbol of feminine beauty (Fig. [139](#)). Kingfisher feathers were also incorporated into embroidery, although their attraction to insects has left few extant examples. In art, as so often in nature, kingfishers are usually depicted with lotus or iris – combinations that are associated with summer.

## MAGPIE

Magpies (once widely known as *xǐquè* 喜鹊 or “good fortune birds” and sharing the homophone *xǐ* for “happiness” but today usually known as *què*) were believed to herald good fortune.<sup>32</sup> In Chinese art, they are identifiable by their white breasts and long, dark, elegant tails (Fig. [138](#)). Whether portrayed seated or in flight, they invariably signal impending good news.

While a picture of five bats is the more common depiction of the Five Happinesses (wealth, health, virtue, longevity, and a natural death), five magpies can carry the same meaning. A picture of twelve magpies is especially auspicious, representing the desire that twelve good wishes should come the viewer’s way. There are many superstitions and prophecies surrounding magpies and their calls in Chinese folklore.

Magpies also represent marriage and happiness. According to Chinese legend, a famous pair of separated lovers is reunited once a year on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month (*qīxī* 七夕) on a celestial bridge made of flocks of magpies (see also SEVEN p. [228](#)). As a result, a pair (*shuāng* 双) of magpies represents conjugal bliss and fidelity, and is a popular decoration represented either by two magpies or the stylized character *shuāngxǐ* (囍). An unmistakable sign that a pair of magpies in a painting represents a married couple is the added presence of ribbons or cords to signal marital ties.

In pre-modern China, the motif of two magpies was especially popular on the backs of mirrors. The superstition decreed that if a man and wife were to be

physically separated, and prior to the separation broke a mirror, each keeping half, the wife's half would turn into a magpie and return to her husband if she was unfaithful to him during his absence.

Because of their significance as messengers of good news, magpies (or a single magpie) are frequently added to pictures and grouped with other symbols to add the hope “to come.” For example, a scene of a successful event or the symbolic portrayal of a desired goal (wealth, progeny, the passing of official examinations, etc.) accompanied by a magpie means “May you achieve this success.”

A popular artistic grouping and marital benediction is a scene of two magpies, bamboo, and prunus (*méi* 梅, usually in the form of plum blossoms and identifiable by clusters of small, five-lobed flowers), in which the bamboo and prunus represent a married couple and the magpies marital bliss. Remember that a pair of magpies represents “double happiness” (囍), as described above.

A painting or scene of magpies and prunus alone expresses a general wish for happiness and joy or “double good news on the way,” since both the early spring blossoms and the magpies signify impending good news (Fig. [141](#)).

However, if the magpie or magpies are perched on the very top branch of the prunus blossoms (*méi* 梅), the meaning is “happiness up to the tips of one's eyebrows” (*xǐ shàng méishāo* 喜上眉梢), where the prunus gives us the rebus for “eyebrow” (*méi* 眉). This may seem a strange reference, but such expressions are often very culturally specific. For example, many Westerners will put their hand to their heart when speaking of themselves or using the word “I,” whereas many Asians point to their nose for the same reference. And if one is going to have a large quantity of a good thing, eyebrow-height is a good high mark (Fig. [140](#)).



Fig. 139 Although most of the kingfisher feathers have fallen or been eaten off this hair ornament, its original beauty can still be imagined. Kingfishers are symbols of feminine beauty.



**Fig. 140 A magpie perched at the very top of a plant, in this case a willow tree, announcing the arrival of good news. Detail from a child's hat. Children's hats, still worn for both decoration and protection, are traditionally appliqued and embroidered with auspicious or protective designs.**



**Fig. 141 A pair of magpies, representing marriage and happiness, sits amongst prunus blossoms on a household door in Yunnan, southwest China.**



Fig. 142 The oriole was a rank badge motif for civil officials of the eighth and ninth ranks during the Ming Dynasty but later became the bird used on the badges of court musicians. Here an oriole sits amidst magnolia blossoms. Detail from a screen.



Fig. 143 Owls in a wax resist pattern of the Miao minority people of Guizhou, China.

## MANDARIN DUCK.

See DUCK p. [71](#).

## ORIOLE

The oriole was a motif on badges for civil officials of the eighth and ninth ranks during the Ming Dynasty (sharing this place with the quail and the Asian Paradise Flycatcher) (Fig. [142](#)). However, when the Emperor Qiánlóng reallocated these status symbols in 1776, the oriole motif became the official badge for court musicians.

## OWL

The pictogram for the word “owl” (*xiāo* 梟, but also *xiāo* 鵂, and also colloquially known as *māotóuyīng* 猫头鹰, literally “cat-headed bird of prey”) is a bird (*niǎo* 鸟) sitting high in a tree (*mù* 木), which probably confirms the owl’s existence as one of the oldest recorded birds. Bronze wine vessels in the shape of owls, called *xiāoyǒu* (鴞卣), are known from the Shang Dynasty (1766–1050 BCE). Although we do not know for certain what significance these birds held for the ancient Chinese (there are no extant texts), some scholars believe that only auspicious animals would have been depicted on ritual and other significant bronzes. They were most likely associated with the spiritual world and darkness and death. “Its cry was said to resemble a spirit voice, and the bird was said to call away the soul”<sup>[33](#)</sup>

Embroidered cotton owls are still made as whimsical decorations in Shanxi, but are not commonly known elsewhere. Since the Chinese believe young owls devour their parents, perhaps they are considered “unfilial,” and hence undesirable objects of attention, as Williams suggests,<sup>[34](#)</sup> or perhaps they imply the triumph and continuity of life by one’s descendants.

## PEACOCK

The peacock (*k ōngquè* 孔雀) is admired for its elegance, beauty, and dignity and communicates rank and wealth, even more so if it is spreading its tail (*kāipíng* 开屏), which indicates more magnificence is yet to come (Fig. [144](#)). Raymond Li translates 孔雀开屏 (*k ōngquè kāipíng*) as “a significant fortune is awaiting you.”<sup>[35](#)</sup>

A picture of a peacock was used as the official badge insignia of third-and



fourth-rank civil servants during the early Ming (1391–1527) and third-rank civil servants thereafter, but peacock feathers had been incorporated into both robes and rank badges of other ranks purely for their decorative value since at least the fifth century when the Crown Prince Wenhui noted that a robe had been woven of peacock feathers and that it was “sparkling and resplendent with a golden iridescence.” This is the earliest record of this technique.<sup>36</sup> We know that peacocks from Burma seem to have been an article of tribute as early as the Tang.<sup>37</sup>

Peacock tail feathers (*kǒngquèlíng* 孔雀翎) were used to designate government status right into the Republican era (post-1912) (Fig. 145). Sixth-rank officials and above, who obtained the right to wear peacock feather decorations (known as *língzhī* 翎只) in their official caps, inserted the prescribed type and number into a long, cylindrical [jade] tube known as a *língtǒngzi* 翎筒子. Triple-eyed peacock feathers, which indicated the highest rank, were the preserve of the first three ranks of imperial princes. Lower-ranking Manchu nobles were allowed to don two-eyed feathers, while Chinese nobles and officials down to the sixth rank could wear single-eyed feathers.<sup>38</sup> Below this rank, men could be given the right to wear blue feathers, but these had to be eye-less. Some art historians, such as Jenyns, believe the practice was adopted by the Chinese who had observed the Indian Rajput warriors’ love of peacock feathers; the peacock was the emblem of the Hindu God of War, Kartikeya.<sup>39</sup> By the beginning of the nineteenth century, peacock plumes became so ubiquitous through their availability that their significance was greatly reduced, but if you spot an official in a painting wearing a hat with peacock plumes bearing several eyes, you know you are viewing a personage of significant rank.

Pictures containing peacocks or peacock plumes thus denote “rank” and its accompanying benefits: wealth and power.<sup>40</sup>

Peacock feathers are usually accompanied by other objects that indicate court status, such as red coral (see p. 61). To ensure that the feathers were properly displayed, special vases were made containing rows of small holes around the neck to hold the individual quills.<sup>41</sup> (See also FANS p. 252.) During the Qing Dynasty, there was even a textile design known as *hóngdǐng huālíng* (红顶花翎) consisting of a vase of peacock feathers beside a piece of red coral.

During the early part of the Ming Dynasty, there was a women’s hairstyle known as the “peacock bun,” which consisted of a flat, circular bun decorated

with flowers made of precious stones.<sup>[42](#)</sup>

The peacock is also associated with the Chinese goddess Guānyīn (see p. [201](#)).



Fig. 144 Peacocks are admired throughout Asia and are always associated with high status. Here a

peacock decorates a Buddhist temple in Burma.



Fig. 145 Peacock tail feathers designate rank and status, and being granted permission to wear them on one's court hat was considered an honor. The number and type of feathers a civil servant was allowed to wear was dependent on his rank.

## PHEASANT

The pheasant (*zhì* 雉) represents beauty, good fortune, and literary refinement in China, where many varieties are known. “Marco Polo spoke with wonder of the Chinese pheasants, describing them as ‘twice as big as ours, indeed nearly as big as a peacock....’ His description was thought to correspond to the Reeves Pheasant, which has tail feathers six to seven feet long.”<sup>43</sup>

The golden pheasant (*jīnjī* 金鸡), admired for its distinctive tail and yellow and red coloring, was used as the symbol of first- and second-rank civil servants in the early Ming (1391–1527) and second rank thereafter; while the silver pheasant (*báixián* 白鹇), with its silver colored back and tail, was consistently used to designate a fifth-rank civil official from 1391 through to 1911 (Fig. 146). Like all the other rank badge birds during the Qing Dynasty, they were positioned standing on a rock, gazing towards the sun, the symbol of the emperor and imperial power.<sup>44</sup>

On rank badges, the key to identifying a golden pheasant is its “two long, smooth-edged, sword-like tail feathers usually lightly barred in black.”<sup>45</sup> Far more common, however, are rank badges of silver pheasants, representing the fifth rank – a rank at which many officials seemed to get stuck in their careers – characterized by a white body, crested head, and “long, scalloped or serrated-



edged tail feathers. In the early Ch'ing [Qing] period, it typically had *three* of these feathers, later it had *five*.”<sup>46</sup>

“A pheasant with a long tail can be called a *chángzhì* (长雉) which puns on *chángzhì* (长雉),”<sup>47</sup> which is “a period of long (*cháng*) rule (*zhì*).” Long-tailed pheasants, often accompanied by other auspicious birds, were a popular porcelain decoration.<sup>48</sup> Long-tailed pheasants and quails are a particularly auspicious pairing, especially during the reign of the Emperor Yǒngzhèng. See QUAIL p. [84](#).

Pheasants are also strongly associated with women.<sup>49</sup> During the Song Dynasty (CE 960–1279), the robe the empress wore on grand state occasions was decorated with colorful pheasants contained within a red border decorated with dragons and clouds.<sup>50</sup> When wearing this garment, protocol dictated that she also wear the phoenix crown. The type of pheasant is not identified, but we know that in the following dynasty a white-crowned, long-tailed pheasant known as the *dí* (翟) was “associated with high-ranking female members of the imperial family, including the Empress.”<sup>51</sup>



Fig. 146 A silver pheasant rank badge that would have been worn by the wife of a fifth-rank civil official. Qing Dynasty, Yongzheng Period (1723–35). The silver pheasant is identified by its white body, crested head, and two to five long, serrated tail feathers. Note the conch shell and branching coral in the bottom

right, both auspicious symbols. Courtesy of Judith Rutherford, gifted to the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

## PHOENIX

The mythical bird most often seen in Chinese art is identified in English as a phoenix (*fènghuáng* 凤凰), known in China as the “king of birds” (Fig. [156](#)). Its origins, evolution, and history, however, are somewhat complex. Today, the phoenix is understood to be a composite of several birds, by tradition the head of a golden pheasant, the body of a mandarin duck, the tail of a peacock, the legs of a crane, the mouth of a parrot, and the wings of a swallow, and hence represents supreme beauty and grace (Fig. [154](#)).<sup>52</sup> (As with the dragon, the phoenix is believed to be several identifiable varieties, probably deriving from the confusion as to its identity.) Its roots, however, may lie elsewhere.

The term “phoenix” is sometimes used to describe what appear to be at least two different birds in Chinese art: the original Red Bird of the South (the *zhūniǎo* 朱鸟, sometimes referred to in a variant pronunciation, *zhūquè*), and the *fènghuáng* (凤凰). Both terms appear in ancient Chinese texts.<sup>53</sup> The Red Bird of the South is one of the oldest creatures known in Chinese art, and is associated with the direction south and the other three “compass” animals: the tiger or *qílín*, dragon, and tortoise (Fig. [152](#)). These originally represented the four quadrants of the sky, according to the ancient Chinese, who associated each with a specific season (see p. [109](#)). Furthermore, there was another mythical bird known as the *luán* (鸾),<sup>54</sup> which eventually merged with the male phoenix known as *fèng* (凤) during the Yuan Dynasty (CE 1280–1376). The female phoenix was known as a *huáng* (凰). Modern Chinese thus use the two (male and female) terms together to form the designation “phoenix” (*fènghuáng* 凤凰), although most sinologists today agree that this bird has little to do with the phoenix.<sup>55</sup>





Fig. 147 Detail of a stunning *kèsī* (slit tapestry) hanging, 196 x 152 cm, of two phoenix surrounded by clouds, peonies, “pearls,” and *tàihú* rocks. Note the male phoenix, midair, with the five serrated (sometimes also described as barbed) tail filaments while the female, standing on the rock, has the curled tail feathers. Courtesy of the Chris Hall Collection Trust (on loan to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore).



Fig. 148 A stemmed wine cup bearing an image of a male phoenix with a tail segmented into five serrated filaments.



Fig. 149 A female phoenix decorates this small enamel box. Diam. 7 cm.

Various visual clues help in the dating of phoenixes from the time they first appeared in the visual arts from the Six Dynasties Period (CE 220–589) onward. Striding phoenixes with outstretched wings are the norm during the Six Dynasties into the early Tang. Sometime in the late Tang they became airborne and we see them in flight. By the Northern Song (CE 960–1126), we learn that phoenixes began to be depicted rising in flight with their legs tucked up into their bodies, “tail segmented into five barbed filaments; and by the Southern Song [1127–1279], it was usually paired, either with another phoenix or with a *luán* (鸾), a mythical bird.”<sup>56</sup>

So are pictures of what appear to be two phoenixes really two phoenixes or a phoenix and a *luán*? Both are shown with long tails, differentiated only by the number or type of tail filaments (Fig. 147). The tail of a male phoenix/ *luán*

ended in five barbed strands, while that of the *fènghuáng* was divided into two, characterized by curling tendrils.<sup>57</sup> It was during the foreign (Mongol) Yuan Dynasty that the *luán* and the *fènghuáng* when depicted together began to be interpreted as the male and female forms of the same bird, a phoenix, with the male having five separated filaments to the female's two leafy tendrils (Fig. 148).<sup>58</sup> The number of tail feathers was determined by the Chinese belief that odd numbers are *yáng* (male), while even numbers are *yīn* (female). Interestingly, in Miao folk art, birds represent men and fish women (Fig. 155).

During the Ming Dynasty, combs were added to the heads of phoenixes, with no differentiation between gender. A phoenix without a comb is therefore preMing.

While seen as a symbol of strength, and associated with warmth and the sun (*yáng* 阳), the phoenix takes the “female” *yīn* (阴) position when coupled with its counterpart in the animal kingdom, the dragon, as it controls the “male” *yáng* position (Fig. 153). In this pairing they form the ultimate conjugal pair, representing *yīn* and *yáng* (female and male), a design that is still used on modern Chinese wedding invitations and decorations.

Because the emperor was associated with the dragon, the phoenix came to be associated with the empress, and was a common decorative motif used by female members of the emperor's family on their clothing and such accessories as hair ornaments and earrings (Fig. 149).<sup>59</sup> Since the time of the Qin (BCE 221–206) and Han (206 BCE – CE 220) Dynasties, the empress's crown, which consisted of phoenixes, was known as the “phoenix crown (*fèngguān* 凤冠).”<sup>60</sup> A beautiful cotton-padded robe dating back to the Liao Kingdom (CE 947–1125), excavated in Liaoning Province, is decorated with fairies riding phoenixes, together with a motif of peaches, butterflies, and water birds. During the Ming Dynasty, princesses wore rank badges decorated with phoenixes.<sup>61</sup>





Fig. 150 A painting of a phoenix amidst peonies forms part of the decorations of this Yunnan home. Together they represent rank and honor, prosperity and righteousness. The phoenix's high position just under the ceiling emphasizes the auspicious meaning. Note the top edge of a bat-framed window below and the *rúyì*-decorated beams above.



Fig. 151 A Chinese Paradise Tree with its distinctive five-lobed leaves executed in plaster relief finished with decorative painting, an art form known as *huīsù* (灰塑). Detail from the House of Tan Yeok Nee, Singapore. Courtesy of Winpeak Investment and Wingem Investment Pte Ltd.



Fig. 152 Often identified as an ostrich, this figure of a bird stands along the “spirit trail” that is located on the southern approach to the tomb of the Emperor Taizōng and the Empress W ŭ Zétian, located about 75 km (49 miles) northwest of Xian.



Fig. 153 Two pairs of phoenix and dragons mirror one another on this modern carpet from Bhutan, separated by a medallion of a flowering lotus with swirling branches and two “pearls.” The phoenix each carry a flower in their mouths. Wool weft with cotton warp, 95 x 178 cm.





Fig. 154 A phoenix in flight, soaring through clouds, with its telltale characteristics – the head of a golden pheasant, the body of a mandarin duck, a peacock's tail, crane's legs, parrot's mouth, and swallow's wings. Detail from a gilt screen in the Beijing Hotel, Beijing.



Fig. 155 Two phoenix form a design unit on this wax-resist pattern of the Miao minority people of Guizhou. In Miao folk art, birds represent men and fish women.



Fig. 156 Four phoenix bearing knotted ribbons surround a lotus medallion with leaves. This

combination is known as *shòu niǎo xiá jié*, and when unravelled translates into the bestowing of rank linked with honors and a long life. Tibetan, early twentieth century. Wool weft with cotton warp, 53 x 70 cm. (See p. [255](#).) The phoenix was also said to appear only during the reigns of righteous emperors and in times of peace, so although its more common pairing is with a dragon, it is sometimes paired with the *qílín* (see p. [140](#)). Because of this association with peaceful and benevolent times, it came to symbolize good fortune or impending good fortune. A picture of a phoenix thus wishes the recipient good fortune in the form of superior achievement (as opposed to the riches symbolized by a bat).

According to Chinese legend, the only tree on which a phoenix will alight is the Chinese Parasol (or Phoenix or Varnish) Tree (*wútóng* 梧桐), identifiable by its distinctive large, five-lobed, paw-shaped leaves, which measure up to 12 inches (30 cm) across (Fig. [151](#)). A picture of a phoenix *fènghuáng* (凤凰) standing open-mouthed, singing high up in this tree, with the sun in the background, is an ancient auspicious design expressing “all is well in the world” (*tiānxià tàipíng* 天下太平). The phoenix in the tree represents “all under heaven” (*tiānxià* 天下), and the sun (*tàiyáng* 太阳) represents *tàipíng* (太平), which means “peaceful.”

This motif can also be taken to mean “talent will be rewarded by rapid, unimpeded career success.” The phoenix’s position high (*gāo* 高) up in the tree inspires the concept of talent or “high ability” (*gāocái* 高才). The phoenix *fènghuáng* (凤凰) gives us the homophone *fèng* (俸), which means “salary,” the reward that came with an official position in the civil service. The fact that the phoenix is singing (*chàng* 唱) gives us a homophone for “smooth, unimpeded” (*chàng* 畅).

Phoenixes are often associated with swift success and/or a rise in position because their name (*fènghuáng* 凤凰) provides the homophone for another *huáng* (黄) in the four-character expression *fēihuáng téngdá* (张果老), “to make rapid advances in one’s career, have a meteoric rise.”

Phoenixes are often depicted with peonies, which complement the phoenix’s own high rank and honor, so together they represent prosperity and righteousness. A phoenix “crossing flower shrubs symbolized happiness and joy” (Fig. [150](#)).<sup>62</sup>

One of the Eight Immortals, Zhāng Guǒlǎo (张果老, see p. [179](#)) is sometimes

depicted carrying a phoenix feather.

## PIGEON

See DOVE p. [71](#).

## QUAIL

The small, plump little quail (*ānchún* 鹌鹑) is admired in China for its fighting spirit and courage and thus earned its way onto the badges of eighth-and ninth-rank civil servants during the early Ming (from 1391 to 1527) and ninth-rank badges from 1527 to 1644, but was then elevated to eighth rank from 1652 on (Fig. [157](#)). This plucky little bird is “another bird of the *yang* principle and particularly associated with fire.”<sup>[63](#)</sup>

Its dull appearance, however, has also equated it with poverty (although prostitutes were once referred to as “quails who sell their feathers”).<sup>[64](#)</sup>

Probably the most common use of the quail in Chinese art, however, is its homophonous relationship with the morpheme *ān*, which means “peace” (安). Hence, a picture of a pair of quails (*shuāng ān* 双鹌) can also be read as *shuāng ān* (欢安) or “peace and prosperity”<sup>[65](#)</sup> (Fig. [158](#)). Nine (*jiǔ* 九) quails (*ānchún* 鹌鹑) together (*tóng* 同) on one level is simply “nine quails together” (*jiǔ ān tóng* 九鹌同). As a rebus, however, it can be read as “forever peace” (*jiǔ ān tóng* 久安同). The Emperor Yǒngzhèng (雍正, r. 1723–35) commissioned some porcelain with the motif of nine quails and a long-tailed pheasant to represent (*jiǔ ān chángzhì* 久安长治), where the “long-tailed pheasant” *chángzhì* (长雉) is a rebus for the *chángzhì* (长治) that means “long-running.” This design deciphered should thus be understood as “[May the country be] in peace and order forever.”<sup>[66](#)</sup> Furthermore, if there is a chrysanthemum (*jú* 菊) in the picture, Eberhard notes that the verb “living,” as in “living together in peace” (*zhù* 住), can be understood.<sup>[67](#)</sup>

The National Museum of Korea in Seoul has a Ming scroll entitled *Birds and Flowers on a Snowy Day* showing a pleasant combination of prunus and bamboo (symbolizing the “double happiness of bamboo and plum” or *zhú méi shuāngxǐ* 竹梅双喜), together with a quail, a pheasant, sparrows, and other small birds. In this scene, the quail is a pun for both “peace” (*ān* 安) and “spring” (*chūn* 春), and

while faithful to its winter-becoming-spring theme, also conveys a more subtle message for a peaceful, prosperous, and blessed marriage.

Quail (*ānchún* 鹌鹑) together with standing grain (*hé* 禾) provide us with the rebus *ānhé* (安和) that can be interpreted as “peace and harmony,” which explains the popularity of this ubiquitous motif (see Fig. [120](#)).



Fig. 157 Quail are admired in China for their fighting spirit and courage, but play a larger role in Chinese art by being homophonous with the word that means “peace” (*ān*). Detail from a scroll. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.





Fig. 158 Two quails forage amongst the fallen leaves of autumn with some bright red berries of the Heavenly Bamboo plant at their feet. Detail from a modern screen. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

## RAVEN

The raven (*dùyā* 渡鸦, literally “passage crow”) has strong associations with the sun in Chinese art and folklore as there are several legends concerning ravens that either live in the sun or fly across the sky carrying a sun. The ancient text *Shānhǎ ijīng* (山海经, *Guideways through Mountains and Seas*) describes a giant mulberry tree known as the *fúsāng* (扶桑) tree that was said to be the home of the ten suns that originally existed in the world.<sup>68</sup> Each day one of the suns would be borne across the sky by a raven until one day when they rebelled at taking turns and all ten took flight. Hòu Yì, the Archer (see p. 164), shot down nine of them in order to protect the world from their heat. In art, the suns are often depicted as ravens at his feet. Luckily, he was stopped from shooting down the tenth and final raven – and hence removing all light and warmth from the world – just in



the nick of time. The remaining raven that resides on the sun is usually shown with three legs and is often red or gold in color. The sun is sometimes shown as a raven in a circle. Indeed, one of the Twelve Imperial Symbols, the one that represents the sun, is a three-legged bird in a red circle (see TWELVE p. [523](#)).

Three-legged ravens (known collectively as *sānzúniǎo* 三足鸟) are also sometimes depicted in pictures of Xī Wángmǔ, the Queen Mother of the West (see p. [203](#)), as they were believed to serve as her messengers. Ravens are linked to other Daoist immortals as well.

Ravens are also associated with filial piety because of the belief that they continue to look after their parents in old age. Ravens in pictures should not be confused with magpies (see p. [77](#)), which are auspicious harbingers of good news, nor with “unlucky” crows (see p. [71](#)).

## ROC

Rocs (*péng* 鹏) are very large and powerful birds. There is a saying in Chinese, “a roc’s flight of 10,000 li” (*péngchéng wànlǐ* 鹏抃万里), meaning “to have a bright future.” Therefore, a picture of a roc was used to wish someone well before taking the civil service examinations, or upon completing them in the hope of achieving good results.

## ROOSTER

The rooster or **cock** is distinctive as the sole bird in the cycle of twelve animals comprising the Chinese zodiac (Fig. [161](#)).

In Chinese folklore, as in many cultures, roosters (*jī* or *gōngjī* 公鸡) are associated with the sun, hence they are also associated with such *yáng* principles as strength and masculinity (Fig. [160](#)). As a result, both roosters and hens (*jī* 鸡) are said to have the ability to scare away evil spirits. Daoist robes decorated with the symbols of *yáng* and *yīn* incorporate such motifs as the rabbit on the moon making the elixir of immortality and a three-legged rooster on a red background to represent the sun.<sup>69</sup> A painting of a red rooster on a gate was said to protect homes from fire.

A white rooster was occasionally placed on top of coffins to scare away evil

spirits, while ceramic funerary figures of cocks were placed inside tombs. A recent archaeological find along China's ancient silk route was the mummy of a tall young man excavated from the Yingpan Cemetery in Xinjiang (grave M15), whose "head rested on a [silk] embroidered pillow shaped like a crowing rooster."<sup>70</sup> Yingpan is presumed to date to the Han or Jin Period and it is believed that the town existed into the Tang Dynasty.

Two of China's oldest folk art motifs are of a child (*wáwa* 娃娃) grasping (*zhuā* 抓) a rooster (*jī* 鸡) or **cockerel** (*zhuājīwáwa* 抓鸡娃娃), which is still found as a traditional papercut in northern Shaanxi,<sup>71</sup> and a cock (*jī* 鸡) with a fish (*yú* 鱼) in its beak (*jīxiányú* 鸡衔鱼) (Fig. 162). Cocks and fish are ciphers for "happiness" (*jí* 吉) and "abundance" (*yú* 余), for example, "a multitude of descendants and money."



Fig. 159 Although this bird resembles a pigeon or dove more than a raven, its three legs clearly identify it with the sun, within which it is depicted. Detail from a mural in the Beijing Hotel, Beijing.



Fig. 160 In Chinese folklore, as in many cultures, roosters are associated with the sun and hence such *yáng* principles as strength and masculinity. Here a cock looks over his shoulder at the sun (the Chinese character in the circle is the character for “sun” or “day”) in a pose that is reminiscent of the far more regal birds that used to appear on the rank badges of Imperial China. Detail from a child’s decorative collar.



Fig. 161 A modern papercut of a rooster, one of the twelve animals, and the only bird, of the Chinese zodiac.



Fig. 162 This contemporary peasant painting depicts one of the oldest folk art motifs we have – a child with a rooster (*jī*) and fish (*yú*), ciphers for “happiness” (*jī*) and “abundance” (*yú*). Note the auspicious red clouds (see p. 249) and sun. The inscription (lower right) reads *Dà jí tú* (“very auspicious picture”).

“Sun cakes” adorned with little cutouts of roosters were once made in Beijing on the first day of the second lunar month and offered in sacrifice to the sun. Today, these have disappeared and only “moon cakes” associated with the Mid-Autumn Festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar remain. Eggs that are dyed red are still eaten at Chinese New Year, however, and to celebrate the birth of a son.

One of the reasons there are so many Chinese paintings, snuff bottles, and other artifacts decorated with cocks is because they were a sophisticated pictogram for many felicitous messages that were well understood and appreciated by members of the élite ruling class, the literati, who enjoyed the cock’s double meaning.



Cocks and/or cockerels also symbolize good luck in general, as the word for the domestic rooster (*jī* 鸡) resembles that for “lucky, auspicious” (*jí* 吉). A large (*dà* 大) rooster therefore represents “extensive” good luck. Other attributes of the cock include literary ability (its red comb, the cockscomb, *jīguān* 鸡冠, is said to resemble a scholar’s (government official’s) hat; *guānmiǎn* 冠冕), ferocity and courage (its spurs recalling military gear); benevolence (it protects its flock of hens), and faithfulness (it calls to the sun every morning).

This gives rise to many interesting messages all based upon Imperial China’s examination system, which was used to revere learning and identify scholarly talent amongst its populace. Passing the state examinations brought one not only honor but also public office and an accompanying salary and other benefits. For example, two cocks standing (*shàng* 上) together, one larger than the other or one standing slightly taller than the other, can be interpreted as *guānshàng jiāguān* (冠上加冠) or “[May you achieve] rank upon rank” (*guānshàng jiāguān* (官上加官)). This was a popular design used to congratulate newly appointed officials or those receiving a promotion.

A standing (*shàng* 上) cock with comb (*guān* 冠) plus (*jiā* 加) some coxcomb (this flower, *Celosia*, a member of the amaranth family, is known in Chinese not surprisingly as *jīguānhuā* (鸡冠花力)), can be read as the rebus *guānshàng jiāguān shǎngjí* (冠上加冠赏吉) or “rank (as represented by an official’s hat, *guān*) attaining (*shàng*) yet (*jiā*) rank (*guān*) grants/bestows (*shǎng* 赏) happiness (*jí* 吉).” More colloquially, it might be translated as “May you be granted the good things that come with continual promotions.” And just to complicate such interpretations, there is still yet another *jī* that means “achievement and accomplishment” (*jī* 勳), so there is an implication that these continual promotions will have been attained through one’s achievements.



Fig. 163 A very popular motif is that of a cock in a peony garden, symbolizing the pleasures of the simple (country) life as well as the hope that one will be blessed by rank and wealth, as denoted



respectively by the cock's comb and the peonies. Very often, both a cock and a hen are represented, often accompanied by their chickens! Detail of a wall design in a Yunnan courtyard. Note also the four bats representing the Four Happinesses.



Fig. 164 Detail from a farmyard door of a cock with a magnificent comb (representing official rank) admiring a beautiful peony (rank and wealth).

Five (*wǔ* 五) cockerels depicted together, using the *gōngjī* (公鸡) name for roosters, gives us several variants of *wǔ gōng* (五公, “the five concepts,” 五功, “the five martial arts,” amongst others), which alludes to various groupings of five.

And, finally, the crowing (*jīmíng* 鸡鸣) of a cock (*gōngjī* 公鸡) was interpreted as an auspicious (*jí* 吉) omen of a forthcoming event that would bring “scholarly honor or official rank” (*gōngmíng* 功名).

A common everyday sentimental painting depicts a cock and hen in a peony garden, symbolizing the pleasures of the simple (country) life as well as the hope that a couple find happiness together and be blessed by rank and wealth (represented by the cock's comb and the peonies) (Figs. [163](#), [164](#)). A rooster

standing on a rock (*shí* 石) symbolizes “good luck to your family” (*shi* being a pun on the word for “family or clan,” *shì* 氏).

Roosters are also found with magpies since magpies are believed to herald good fortune (see p. 77), resulting in the combined meaning of “prosperity to come” or “May prosperity come your way.”

## SPARROW

Sparrows (*què* or *máquè* 麻雀, literally “flaxen sparrows”) are usually depicted perched on stalks of rice, an especially popular pictorial theme during the eighth lunar month. They have much the same symbolism sparrows hold elsewhere – as fluttery, nervous little birds<sup>72</sup> – but were also regarded as good omens and placed in the same “good omen category” as the dragon, female phoenix, female *qílín*, and tortoise in at least one source book dating back to the early seventh century.<sup>73</sup> The “standing [rice] grain” (*hé* 禾) is a rebus for the *hé* that means “harmony” and “peace” (*hé* 和).

It is said that the Emperor Míngdì (明帝, r. 323–5) “enjoyed painting sparrows and crickets, and the brothers Liu Lin-tsu and Liu Shao-ku imitated the Emperor’s taste for sparrows and crickets, and added mice to the repertory. The theme had lasting popularity. The great painter Lù Tánwēi [陆探微, ca. 440–500] tried his hand at it, and so did the Liang Emperor Yuándì [元帝, r. 552–4] who painted it on round silk fans. We have not the slightest idea what these pictures looked like, but the popularity of the theme attested by literary sources shows that men were concerned to study the little things of nature as well as the great.”<sup>74</sup>

Sparrows were nearly eradicated in China in the 1950s during the Great Leap Forward as they were considered one of the Four Pests (together with rats, flies, and mosquitoes) but were later replaced by bed bugs when it was realized that they were more beneficial than harmful to agricultural societies.<sup>75</sup>

## STARLING

Starlings are often depicted as pairs in Chinese paintings and, as with all pairings of birds, should be taken to represent a husband and wife. The flower or shrub

they are shown with is a clue to the painting's meaning (for example, if accompanied by peonies, the message is for a “noble” or successful marriage).

## STORK

Storks (*guàn* 鹤), cranes (*hè* 鹤), and sometimes herons (*cānglù* 苍鹭), like tortoises, represent longevity, and are thus often found in combination with pine trees. Storks are supposed to live 1,000 years and from the age of 600 to refrain from solid foods and to subsist only on liquids. They are considered the “patriarchs of the feathered animals,”<sup>76</sup> and figure often in tales related to the Eight Immortals (see p. 176). Storks are, for example, Xī Wángmǔ's and Shòuxīng's special carrier, and they are often shown with them.

*Guān*, however, means not only “stork” but is also a homophone shortcut for “government official's hat” (*guānmiǎn* 冠冕), which every Chinese knows means a secure income. Hence, storks (together with egrets and cranes) also represent official position and its benefits. Storks amid lotuses represent “continuous promotion in officialdom” (see LOTUS p. 27).

Storks and cranes can be distinguished from herons and egrets when in flight by their fully outstretched necks (herons and egrets, which are slightly smaller in size, fly with their necks tucked into an “S” shape). The bills of storks are also noticeably larger.

## SWALLOW

The arrival of swallows (*yàn* 燕) in the spring (*chūn* 春) heralds good fortune and a prosperous change for the better with all the usual symbolism of springtime (Fig. 165). Pictures of swallows always mean “good news coming,” and when pictured with newly flowering prunus can be understood on one level as “swallows returning” (*yànguīlái* 燕归来) and on another as “the return of spring's riotous colors” (*yànguīlái* 艳归来).

Swallows depicted in combination with apricot trees can also be a reference to the Confucian examination system of Imperial China, when the first celebration party in honor of the new graduates was held in an apricot grove.<sup>77</sup> A homophone for swallows means “banquet” (*yàn* 宴), so swallows in apricot trees

(literally “apricot forest and spring swallow,” *xìnglín chūnyàn* 杏林春燕), can be understood as *xìnglín chūnyàn* (杏林春宴) or “May you enjoy the spring banquet in an apricot grove,” in other words, “Pass your examinations successfully!”

## SWAN

A scene of a swan being pursued through pond plants represents an ancient hunting scene (see EAGLE p. [73](#)).

If you find a painting or carving of **five different birds**, you might be looking at the pictorial representation of the Five Basic Relationships of Confucianism (*wǔlùntú* 五论图), also known as the Five Discussions. Confucius taught that there were five basic relationships that set the desired norms for all human behavior and ensured a world of stability: ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, and older friend and younger friend. These relationships are sometimes represented as a series of five objects. One of the oldest examples is a jade belt plaque composed of small, rectangular pieces of jade with a carved design that were sewn or fastened onto a belt to decorate it, depicting five different types of birds amongst flowers, believed to be an illustration of these five Confucian relationships.[78](#)



Fig. 165 These swallows, which always herald good fortune and a prosperous change for the better, flying above a field of springtime flowers is the depiction of a very popular design known as *yàn guī lái*, which can be interpreted both as “swallows returning” and “the return of spring’s riotous colors.” Contemporary peasant painting.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Jessica Rawson, *Chinese Ornament: The Lotus and the Dragon*, London: British Museum Publications, 1984, p. [90](#).
- <sup>2</sup> These bird and/or animal patterns were woven into the fabric of the garments unlike the later rank badges, which were made separately, usually embroidered, and sewn onto the finished gown. For this reason, these earlier motifs are known as *xiōngbèi* (月匈背), literally “chest-back.” According to many scholars, including Professor Zhao Feng of China’s National Silk Museum, they may have been the prototype rank badges.
- <sup>3</sup> Zhou Xun and Gao Chunming, *5000 Years of Chinese Costumes*, Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1984, p. [88](#).
- <sup>4</sup> This term first appears during the Jiājìng reign (r. 1522– 67). Professor Zhao Feng, China National Silk Museum, January 14, 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> Ong Hean-Tatt, *Chinese Animal Symbolisms*, Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 1993, pp. [270–5](#).
- <sup>6</sup> Sometimes expressed in reverse, *báitóu fùguì* (白头富贵).



- <sup>7</sup> One of the most beautiful robes excavated from an early Qing Dynasty tomb is known as the “Hundred Cranes” robe for its motif. See Jean Mailey, *Embroidery of Imperial China*, New York: China House Gallery and China Institute in America, 1978, pp. [44–5](#). It may be seen today in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City.
- <sup>8</sup> Indeed, such a painting exists in the Tokyo National Museum, Japan, entitled *Yīpǐnfùguì*. See Ni Yibin, “The Anatomy of Rebus in Chinese Decorative Arts,” *Oriental Art*, Vol. 49, No. 3 [2004], p. [23](#).
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. [15](#).
- <sup>10</sup> T. C. Lai (ed.), *Things Chinese*, Hong Kong: Swindon Book Company, 1971, p. [42](#).
- <sup>11</sup> Sotheby’s, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, auction catalogue, New York, March 23, 2004, item #17, pp. [16–17](#).
- <sup>12</sup> 段建华, 中国吉祥装饰设计 [Duàn Jiàn huá, *Chinese Auspicious Decoration Design*], 北京: 中国轻工业出版社 [May 1, 1999], p. [55](#).
- <sup>13</sup> Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, London: Serindia Publications, n.d., p. [96](#).
- <sup>14</sup> Crows apparently still augur evil in the Chinese world, hence the title of the 2001 Jiu Dan book, *Crows*, purporting to be the story of how Chinese nationals residing in Singapore are willing to sacrifice anything to stay, including entering the sex trade. As a review in *The Singapore Women’s Weekly* put it, “Some say that *Crows* honestly describes the life-or-death struggles of China-born women. Others say the book shows them to be nothing but scheming scavengers.”
- <sup>15</sup> Sotheby’s, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, p. [116](#).
- <sup>16</sup> Roberta Helmer Stalberg and Ruth Nesi, *China’s Crafts: The Story of How They’re Made and What They Mean* (New York: Eurasia Press, 1980, p. [63](#)) quote the famous Han Dynasty folk poem which tells of a couple who commit suicide and are buried together. One day, in the trees above the tomb two birds are spotted: “Who named themselves Birds of True Love [mandarin ducks]. They lift their heads and face to face they sing, every night till the fifth watch is done.”
- <sup>17</sup> Mailey, *Embroidery of Imperial China*, p. [10](#).
- <sup>18</sup> *Flower Shadows Behind the Curtain (Ge Liàn Huā Yǐng), A Sequel to Jīn Píng Méi*, New York: Pantheon, 1959.
- <sup>19</sup> We know he owned this dish as his collection mark is visible on the back of it. Julia B. Curtis, “Tales told in Porcelain: Jingdezhen: Blue-and-White Wares at the San Antonio Museum of Art,” *Oriental Art*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2005, pp. [44–50](#).
- <sup>20</sup> Mailey, *Embroidery of Imperial China*, p. [24](#).
- <sup>21</sup> Sotheby’s, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, item #47, p. [29](#).
- <sup>22</sup> Ni, “The Anatomy of Rebus in Chinese Decorative Arts,” pp. [20–3](#).
- <sup>23</sup> See for example, items #59 and 75 in Sotheby’s, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, pp. [35](#), [44](#).
- <sup>24</sup> “Tales from the Land of Dragons: 1000 Years of Chinese Painting,” Boston Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), exhibition website [www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org). The scroll described can be seen in the museum.

- <sup>25</sup> Zhao Feng, “The Development of Rank Symbols for Officials in the Tang and Yuan Dynasties,” paper presented at the symposium on “Setting the Dress Code: The Relationship between Power and Textiles in Imperial China,” Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore, January 14, 2006, <sup>26</sup> Also sometimes known in English as the *Book of Odes*. See Bk. I, Ode viii, p. <sup>263</sup>, Pt. ii; decade of Luh Ming, Legge’s translation, in Soame Jenyns, *A Background to Chinese Painting*, New York: Schocken Books, 1966, p. <sup>164</sup>, fn 3.
- <sup>27</sup> Jessica Rawson, *Chinese Jade: From the Neolithic to the Qing*, London: British Museum Press, 1995, p. 335.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Ken Kaufman, *Kaufman Field Guide: Birds of North America*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005, p. <sup>194</sup>.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Sū Wǔ (蘇武, 140–60 BCE) was a minister of the Emperor Wǔdì of the Western Han Dynasty who was imprisoned by the barbarians while delivering a message. After many years, Wǔdì’s successor, Emperor Zhāodì (日召帝), demanded Sū Wǔ’s release, but his captors falsely reported that he had already died. However, they were confronted with the information that the emperor had shot down a wild goose near the capital that bore a letter from Sū Wǔ, proving he was still alive. Sū Wǔ was finally released after nineteen years of imprisonment.
- <sup>32</sup> The character *què* (鶴), which originally meant “sparrow,” is now one of the most widely used characters in bird names, and is used for many birds completely unrelated to sparrows. See <http://www.cvjlang.com>
- <sup>33</sup> Rose Kerr (ed.), *The T. T. Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art: Chinese Art and Design*, London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1991, p. <sup>36</sup>. While researching this subject, I happened across a reference ([www.martrix.org/immortality.pdf](http://www.martrix.org/immortality.pdf)), an article entitled “A Taoist Path to Immortality: The Taoist Secret of Power is to Follow the Nature of Things” that discusses the origins of the Chinese ideogram for “immortal” [*xiān* 仙] being “a man and a mountain, suggesting a hermit; the older form of *hsien* [*xiān* in Pinyin], however, shows a man dancing around, flapping his sleeves like wings. To become immortal is to be ‘transformed into a feathered being.’ [This] image comes from the mythology of eastern Chinese tribes who claimed bird ancestors, worshipped bird deities, and held religious rites with bird dances performed on stilts. The affinity of the Daoist immortals to birds (crane, phoenix, magpie, stork, or raven) is a persistent theme in iconography and legend.” An intriguing topic to pursue by interested readers.
- <sup>34</sup> C. A. S Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, 3rd edn, New York: Dover Publications, 1976, p. 301 reports the expression “The owl is an unfilial bird” (梟不孝之鸟).
- <sup>35</sup> Raymond Li, *A Glossary of Chinese Snuff Bottle Rebus: Re-discovering the Hidden Internal Beauty in Snuff Bottles*, Hong Kong: Nine Dragons, 1976, p. <sup>26</sup>.
- <sup>36</sup> Jackie Menzies, “Buddhist Textiles,” in Judith Rutherford and Jackie Menzies (eds.), *Celestial Silks: Chinese Religious and Court Textiles*, exhibition catalogue, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004, p. <sup>38</sup>.
- <sup>37</sup> Jenyns, *A Background to Chinese Painting*, p. <sup>187</sup>.
- <sup>38</sup> Gary Dickinson and Linda Wrigglesworth, *Imperial Wardrobe*, Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press,

2000, p. [112](#).

[39](#) Jenyns, *A Background to Chinese Painting*, p. [187](#).

[40](#) When the Princess Der Ling, the daughter of a member of the Manchu White Banner Corps, described her visit to the imperial court in Beijing in the memorable volume *Two Years in the Forbidden City: First Lady-in-Waiting to the Empress Dowager* (New York: Moffat, Yard & Co., 1911, Ch. 2), she noted: “On each side of Her Majesty’s throne were two upright ebony poles on the top of which were peacock feathers made into the shape of a fan.”

[41](#) An excellent example, a cobalt blue-and-white porcelain vase dating from the Ming Dynasty (ht 31.1 cm), exists in the V&A Collection in London.

[42](#) Zhou and Gao, *5000 Years of Chinese Costumes*, p. [146](#).

[43](#) Lai, *Things Chinese*, p. [150](#). It is the long tail feathers off the Reeves Pheasant that are used to depict ancient military figures on the Chinese stage.

[44](#) As a result of the appearance of a sun on Qing Dynasty rank badges with its upward-gazing fowl, a rising sun in any picture is often interpreted as the hope for advancement in the civil service. See two examples in the Sotheby’s, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, item #75, p. [45](#).

[45](#) Beverley Jackson and David Hugus, *Ladder to the Clouds: Intrigue and Tradition in Chinese Rank*, Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 1999, p. [147](#).

[46](#) Ibid., p. [155](#).

[47](#) Ni, “The Anatomy of Rebus in Chinese Decorative Arts,” p. [13](#).

[48](#) See, for example, item #524 in Sotheby’s, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*. This lovely twentieth-century eggshell porcelain bowl depicts a long-tailed pheasant together with a quail, a combination discussed under quail, p. [84](#).

[49](#) Jenyns writes in *A Background to Chinese Painting* (p. [186](#)) that the “expression ‘he lightly esteems the domestic fowl but loves the wild pheasant’ is used of a man who forsakes his wife and spends his days with ladies of easy virtue.”

[50](#) Zhou and Chunming, *5000 Years of Chinese Costumes*, p. [110](#).

[51](#) Wong Hwei Lian and Szan Tan (eds.), *Power Dressing: Textiles for Rulers and Priests from the Chris Hall Collection*, exhibition catalogue, Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2006, p. [129](#). The Chris Hall textile collection has a Yuan Dynasty fragment with this motif on it.

[52](#) Parrots were at one time of far more significance in China than one would suspect today from the paucity of objects depicting them. There exist, however, jade parrot pendants dating back to the Neolithic Period (2000–1200 BCE) that can be seen in both the Winthrop Collection at Harvard University and the National Palace Museum in Taipei. See Rawson, *Chinese Jade*, p. [203](#). Pairs of parrots were also a popular ceramic form during the Qing.

[53](#) For a discussion of the evolution of the phoenix, see Rawson, *Chinese Ornament*, pp. [99](#) ff.

[54](#) Liú Ān (刘安), king of Huáinán during the reign of the Emperor Wǔdì (141–87 BCE), wrote a philosophical text known as *Huáinánzǐ* (淮南子). In Chapter 4 of that treatise, entitled “Earthly Exegesis,” Liú Ān includes the following explanation of the origins of animals: “The *yu chia* gave rise

to the flying dragon; the flying dragon gave rise to the phoenix; the phoenix gave rise to the *luán* (another mythical bird); the *luán* gave rise to the common bird, and all animals with feathers are its descendants.”

<sup>55</sup> Both the *fēnghuáng* bird and the *luán* bird appear in the Western Han (206 BCE–CE 25) classic text, *Guideways through Mountains and Seas* (*Shānhǎi jīng* 山海经), a text studied in depth by Richard E. Strassberg (*A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways through Mountains and Seas*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, pp. [193–4](#)). Of these, he writes, “Though almost universally mistranslated in the West as the ‘phoenix,’ with which it has little in common, the Feng-Bird’s origins have been traced by some modern scholars to the ostrich, eagle, pheasant, or peacock. Its depiction has varied over the centuries and become increasingly flamboyant. Later, it was commonly paired with the Luan-Bird or dragon as an imperial symbol and has become a popular decorative motif denoting yin-yang conjugal harmony.”

<sup>56</sup> Claudia Brown, *Weaving’s China’s Past: The Amy S. Clague Collection of Chinese Textiles*, exhibition catalogue, Phoenix, Arizona: Phoenix Art Museum, 2000, pp. [24–5](#).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. [73](#).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. [75](#).

<sup>59</sup> Zhou and Gao, *5000 Years of Chinese Costumes*, p. [130](#).

<sup>60</sup> During the Ming Dynasty, if the bearer was an empress, nine dragons augmented the four phoenixes; if the bearer was only an imperial concubine, nine pheasants were used instead of dragons. Eventually, ordinary women were allowed to wear a “phoenix crown” on their wedding day, thus becoming “empress for a day.”

<sup>61</sup> Jackson and Hugus, *Ladder to the Clouds*, p. [110](#).

<sup>62</sup> 段建华, 中国吉祥装饰设计 [*Chinese Auspicious Decoration Design*], p. [45](#).

<sup>63</sup> Jenyns, *A Background to Chinese Painting*, p. [186](#).

<sup>64</sup> Wolfram Eberhard (trans. G. L. Campbell), *Times Dictionary of Chinese Symbols: An Essential Guide to the Hidden Symbols in Chinese Art, Customs and Beliefs*, Singapore: Federal Publications, 1990, p. [244](#).

<sup>65</sup> There is a lovely example of a bowl dating from the Yǒngzhèng era (1723–35), with just such a motif (two quails, nandina, narcissus, and rocks) in the Asia Society’s Rockefeller Collection.

<sup>66</sup> However, as Ni notes in “The Anatomy of Rebus in Chinese Decorative Arts” (p. [13](#)), “no textual record shows what this motif looks like. The porcelain vase from the Percival David Foundation referred to in the article as being a possible example, although having one long-tailed pheasant and one quail, turned out to be short of the requisite nine quail.”

<sup>67</sup> Eberhard, *Times Dictionary of Chinese Symbols*, p. [244](#).

<sup>68</sup> The ancient Chinese divided a week into ten days with one sun for each day of the week. This tale is also found in the *Chǔ Sǐ* (楚辭), an ancient collection of poems from the end of the Warring States Period and early Western Han.

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.artsmia.org/education/teacher-resources/pnt-fivefacts.cfm?v=39>

<sup>70</sup> Zhou Jinling and Li Wenying, “The Yingpan Cemetery on the Loulan Branch of the Silk Road,”

*Orientations*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2004, p. [41](#).

[71](#) Yang Xianrang and Yang Yang, *Chinese Folk Art*, Beijing: New World Press, 2000, pp. [19](#). [28](#).

[72](#) A good example is the well-known Mainland Chinese movie from 1949, *Crows & Sparrows*, directed by Zheng Junli. The film portrays a boarding house's tenants' struggle to keep their home as a greedy Nationalist official plots to sell the building and run off to Taiwan. Rather than uniting effectively, the tenants "squabble and scatter like sparrows bullied by larger crows," but in the end the landlord is forced to flee as the Red Army approaches.

[73](#) *Yiwén lèijù* (艺文类聚) or *Categorized Reference Book of Literary Writings*. This reference aid, compiled under imperial auspices in the early seventh century, was designed to provide candidates of the civil service examinations with examples of recommended literary phrases.

[74](#) Werner Speiser, *The Art of China: Spirit and Society*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1966, p. [113](#).

[75](#) Eberhard reports in his *Times Dictionary of Chinese Symbols* (p. [271](#)) that the sparrow is regarded as the most "sensual" of all the birds and represents the penis, but the author knows of no artistic representation of this symbolism.

[76](#) Ong, *Chinese Animal Symbolisms*, p. 291.

[77](#) Ni, "The Anatomy of Rebus in Chinese Decorative Arts," p. [17](#).

[78](#) Rawson, *Chinese Jade*, p. 335.





Fig. 166 Four of the Five Poisons (*wǔdú*) are depicted on this pillow – a centipede, scorpion, lizard, and viper. The fifth is the pillow itself – a toad. This motif is especially associated with the date known as the most dangerous day of the year, the fifth day of the fifth lunar month.

## Chapter 5

# INSECTS, REPTILES, FISH, AND AMPHIBIANS

Insects in Chinese art either add a natural touch to a scene or a symbolic message or sentiment (Fig. [167](#)). Many combinations of insects and plants are well-recognized pairings found in both modern and classical paintings, with one nineteenth-century author even writing of how his beloved wife used to attach dried insects to flower arrangements to simulate classical paintings.<sup>1</sup> Insects are commonly found on carvings depicting cabbages or turnips with their associations with money and wealth (see Fig. [69](#)).

## ANT

Ants (*mǎyǐ* 蚂蚁) have mixed symbolism in Chinese art, at times indicating industriousness,<sup>2</sup> obedience, and resourcefulness, at other times self-interest, although this latter usage is unknown, in my experience, in art and is only used in verbal expressions.

## BEE

An insect that represents industriousness is the bee or **wasp** (*fēng* 蜂),<sup>3</sup> so the expression “busy bee” would be well understood by the Chinese. The bee, however, has a greater significance that builds upon its cognomen sounding like the word that means “salary” (*fèng* 俸) and a word that means “abundant, plentiful”<sup>4</sup> (*fēng* 丰). When a bee is pictured together with a monkey (*hóu* 猴), which has a homophone that means a “nobleman or high official” (*hóu* 侯), the combination can be understood as *fèng hóu* or “gaining an official’s office with the resultant good salary” (see MONKEY p. [137](#)). When butterflies accompany the bee and monkey, the meaning intensifies (see BUTTERFLY p. [91](#)). But when a bee (*fēng* 蜂) is shown with bamboo (*zhú* 竹), the meaning is “May you live in abundance” (*fēngzú* 丰足), *fēngzú* meaning “abundant, plentiful.”

## BUTTERFLY

Butterflies (*húdié* 蝴蝶 or simply *dié* 蝶) are often stylized in Chinese art and are a symbol of summer, beauty, romance, and dreams (Fig. 171). Because they are also linked with flowers, an association enjoyed by women in Chinese imagery (see the introduction to PLANTS AND FLOWERS p. 169). One legendary girl is described as being “so proficient in the art of perfuming herself ... that when she went out of doors, ‘bees and butterflies followed her, in love with her fragrance’.”<sup>5</sup> Even the famous Tang Dynasty (CE 618–906) hairstyle worn by women was known as the “butterfly coiffure” (*diéshì*).

A flower and a butterfly together are a sign of a “permanent feeling of affinity”<sup>6</sup> or conjugal fidelity, as is the depiction of two butterflies (or any pair of insects, birds, or animals).



Fig. 167 Insects are much loved and are often depicted in Chinese art, from the chirping cricket to the languidly beautiful butterfly. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

If the two butterflies (*diédié* 蝶蝶) are accompanied by a bee and a monkey, they signify the expression *diédié fēng hóu* (迭迭俸侯), which is a rebus for “unimpeded rise to a high office.” This rebus is solved by knowing that another *dié* (迭) means “repeatedly”; a bee (*fēng* 蜂) has a homophone that means “salary” (*fèng* 俸); and a monkey (*hóu* 猴) has a homophone that means “nobleman, high

official” (*hóu* 侯). For more variations on this theme, see MONKEY p. 137.

Designs of melons (and other rich seed-bearing fruit) and butterflies (*húdié* 蝴蝶) are using the butterfly to give us the *dié* (迭) that means “repeatedly” to express a wish for descendants, as discussed under MELON p. 54 (Figs. 170, 172). Because young melons are also called *dié* (瓞), this is an especially clever and amusing combination.

Butterflies are also a sympathetic way of expressing the desire that someone reach old age because the second syllable of the popular name for butterfly (*húdié* 蝴蝶) shares a homophone for “septuagenarian” (*dié* 耋). A picture of a cat (*māo* 猫) or cats, with its homophone meaning “octogenarian” (*mào* 耄), either chasing or carefully watching a butterfly, is hence a very urbane (and discreet) means of expressing a wish to a seventy-year-old that they live to see another decade, a similar sentiment to the extra candle placed on some Western birthday cakes (Fig. 168). The cats portrayed in these pictures and embroideries are usually calico cats, known in China as “butterfly cats” (cats that have colored spots as opposed to stripes), as they are considered lucky.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes the cat is seated on or next to a longevity stone (see p. 64) to give emphasis to the meaning.

Butterflies, which represent summer, when depicted with chrysanthemums, which represent autumn, symbolize the change of seasons, but if a spray of bamboo is present, adding the concept of “wish” (see BAMBOO p. 20), the design probably represents the solicitous wish of “long life” to the viewer.

The motif of “100 butterflies” is common both in textile and ceramic art and conveys the wish of “100 blessings.” This was a motif on one of the favorite robes of the last Empress Dowager Cixi (慈禧太后, 1834–1908).

Butterflies are sometimes used instead of bats. Cammann tells us that “in South China – particularly Hunan – the other word for butterfly, *hu*, is pronounced exactly like the word *fu* meaning happiness. So robes made there often had the butterfly instead of the bat, in which case it meant both happiness and longevity.”<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, some ancient burial cloths dating back to the mid-fifth to seventh century have been found in a Xinjiang cemetery along China’s famous Silk Road that include the motif of a young Eros-type figure chasing butterflies.<sup>9</sup> There is also a very popular Chinese folk tale, the “Tragedy of Liáng Shānbó and Zhù Yīngtái,” that relates the story of the rebirth of two young “Romeo and Juliet” lovers as butterflies. It is known not only by every school child in China



but is the basis of one of China's most famous modern pieces of classical music, "The Butterfly Lovers."<sup>10</sup> Eberhard writes that "a deceased wife may appear to her husband as a butterfly."<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 168 Although entitled "Children at Play," this mischievous scene is, in reality, a birthday greeting, expressing the desire that a seventy-year-old (symbolized by the butterflies) lives to see his or her eightieth birthday (symbolized by the cat). The secret to interpreting this picture is understanding the homophonous relationships between butterflies and "seventy" and cats and "eighty." A Western copy of a Chinese painting, both of unknown dates.



Fig. 169 Because women are often associated with flowers, which they are said to resemble, many of the items women use – hairpins, purses, jewelry, robes, etc. – are often decorated with butterflies. Shown here is a simple butterfly-shaped hair ornament.





Fig. 170 More butterflies and melons decorate this small embroidered disk.



Fig. 171 Butterflies symbolize summer, beauty, romance, and dreams in Chinese art, and are often depicted together with the flowers that attract them. Detail from a small Qing Dynasty porcelain plate.



Fig. 172 Designs of melons (and other rich seed-bearing fruit) and butterflies (*húdié*) express the desire for repeated (*dié*) generations of descendants. Young melons are also known as *dié*, making the combination particularly linguistically clever. Small enameled porcelain plate.

## CARP

See FISH p. [97](#).

## CATFISH

See FISH p. [99](#).

## CENTIPEDE

See FIVE POISONOUS CREATURES p. [100](#).

## CICADA

Cicadas (*chán* 婢), silkworms, and the praying mantis are the only insects depicted in Shang art. They appear, but only infrequently, on Neolithic pieces.

Cicadas, as a result of their life cycle, which incorporates a dormant larva and resultant pupa stage (when it appears that the insect sheds an old skin to emerge anew), came to be associated with regeneration and hence triumph over death.

According to scholars, jade carvings of cicadas were placed in the mouths of corpses in ancient China, especially during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-CE 220) “to either prevent degeneration of a corpse or perhaps to speed its rebirth in another world.”<sup>12</sup> Cicadas today are still symbols of youth and immortality and their representations – in jade, glass, marble, and other materials – are worn as ornaments or protective charms.



Fig. 173 Long associated with immortality, these cicadas are appropriately carved out of a piece of fossilized wood. Jade carvings of cicadas were once placed in the mouths of corpses in ancient China and cicada amulets are still worn in some places as protective charms. Courtesy of Béatrix Daydé-Latham.



Fig. 174 Two beautifully drawn crabs, a rebus for “harmony.” Ink drawing. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

## CRAB

A crab (*xiè* 蟹) is often used to illustrate the meaning of “harmony” (*xié* 谐) (Fig. [174](#)). When depicted with a lotus or holding a stalk of rice, the combination forms a rebus meaning “harmonious” (*xiéhé* 谐和), as both a “standing [rice] grain” (*hé* 禾) and a lotus (*hé* 荷) can be proxies for the *hé* (和) that means “peace, harmonious.” There are countless examples of water dishes and ink slabs used by the literati class decorated with small crabs coupled with either lotuses or rice (Figs. [175](#), [176](#)). The Palace Museum collection in Beijing also owns several hair ornaments depicting crabs holding stalks of rice, so we know the design was used



by both men (the literati) and women (imperial concubines).

One of the most beautiful and elaborate examples of this combination is a carved Qiánlóng period (1736–95) ivory box in the shape of a crab that, when opened, reveals figures of a crab, lotus, and frog in the bottom half, and in the top half a crab with rice stalks.<sup>13</sup>



Fig. 175 A Dehua (*blanc de chine*) water dish with a crab, lotus, and shrimp symbolizing a peaceful and harmonious old age. © Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore. Gift of Frank and Pamela Hickley.



Fig. 176 This almost looks like an eight-legged spider until we spot the two “pincers” up front and realize it is a crab (*xiè*) holding a stalk of rice (*hé*) to form the rebus that means “harmonious” (*xiéhé*). There may, according to some researchers, be sexual connotations as well. Detail from a lady’s lotus shoe.

Professor Ni Yibin of Singapore has helped translate an interesting jade carving of two crabs holding a reed. The clue to interpreting this piece is in knowing one of the nicknames used to refer to crabs in China: “iron-armored



generals” (*tiějiǎ jiāngjūn* 铁甲将军). Two crabs are then “two iron-armored generals” or *èr tiějiǎ jiāngjūn* (二铁甲将军). *Èrjiǎ* also means “second class” and when combined with the reed (*lú* 芦) the crabs are holding, it gives us *chuánlú* (传卢), “the title of the first candidate in the second class of the successful candidates in the civil service examination.”<sup>14</sup> Put all the pieces together and you have *érjiǎ chuánlú* (二甲传卢) or “May you be at the top of the second-class successful candidates.”

Some believe that a crab also has fertility symbolism. Cammann describes a belt toggle consisting of a linked pair of miniature shoes, one holding a woman’s “lotus” shoe, the other a crab.<sup>15</sup> This rebus is based on a number of puns: first, while we know that *xiè* (蟹) means “crab,” there is another *xié* (鞋) that means “shoes.” The same character can also be pronounced as *wā* in some dialects, reminding us of another *wá* (娃) that means “baby or child.” A dialect word for “shoes” in Cantonese (*haizi*) makes shoes a symbol of having offspring (*háizi* 孩子). So a shoe inside a shoe means “successive generations of children.” The woman’s shoe (which contributes the concept of lotus (*lián* 莲) feet adds the meaning “successive” (*lián* 莲). (See Fig. 34 for an example of how a lotus root can resemble a woman’s shoe.) Altogether, the expression is *háizi yúlián háizi, hái yú dàjiā* – “Children (*háizi* 孩子), bringing forth abundant (*yú* 余) successive (*lián* 莲) children (*háizi* 孩子), and also (*hái* 还) a substantial (*yú* 余) family (*dàjiā* 大家).”

## CRICKET

Crickets are known in Chinese as *qūqū* (虫曲虫曲) or *xīshuài* (蟋蟀), or sometimes as *cùzhī* (促织) (Figs. 177-179).<sup>16</sup> They were, and still are, much loved by the Chinese, and kept for their fighting ability and their song. In art, crickets are associated with spring and summer, but were probably most valued as decorative motifs because of the homophonous relationship of their name with “happiness” (*xǐ* 喜) and “auspiciousness” (*xǐ* 禧). Even the cages they were kept in were in auspicious shapes.



Fig. 177 A cricket and butterflies painted on a cup. Crickets (*xīshuài*), like butterflies, are associated with spring and summer but are particularly valued for their homophonous relationship with the words meaning “happiness” (*xǐ*) and “auspiciousness” (*xǐ*). Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

Chirping insects such as crickets and katydids (see p. 96) used to be kept in gourd cages, and many a vine-less gourd being held by a gentleman in a Chinese painting is really a prize cricket cage (Fig. 180). “The reason why a gourd is used to keep chirping insects in winter times is because it is light in weight, convenient to keep in the vest, warm by nature, and retains warmth after taken out of the vest.”<sup>17</sup> The type of insect dictated the shape of the gourd it was kept in, larger insects requiring more space, and insects capable of hopping long distances, a longer-necked gourd to keep them safely inside.<sup>18</sup> Ornately decorated gourd insect cages could be so expensive and highly valued that it caused one Chinese scholar to lament that it was “why there are so many impoverished nobles in Peking.”<sup>19</sup>

The keeping of chirping insects was particularly popular in the capital city of Beijing during the last 200–300 years of the Qing Dynasty (CE 1644–1911). See also GOURD p. 50.

Crickets were also a popular embroidery motif on traditional heart-and-kidney-shaped Chinese purses (sometimes also known as incense purses) that used to hang from Chinese gentlemen’s belts, as well as eyeglass cases and other items.<sup>20</sup>



Fig. 178 Detail from a porcelain vase featuring butterflies, beetles, and crickets.



Fig. 179 Detail from a porcelain jar in the shape of a lion dog (see Fig. [245](#)) featuring a cricket.



Fig. 180 Three different cages, made of gourds and bamboo, used to house small chirping insects. The type of insect dictated the shape of the gourd it was kept in.

**Katydid**s, which are long-horned grasshoppers and not unlike crickets for our purposes, are known as *guōguo* (蝈蝈), a name that sounds like “country, state, or nation” (*guó* 国). It is recorded that during certain dynasties, “from New Year’s Day to the fifteenth of the first moon in the lunar calendar, all the palaces in the Forbidden City had charcoal burners burning and katydid cages were set on racks and shelves all around them so a chorus of chirping sound continued day and night, implicating ‘envoys from ten thousand states are paying tribute to the Emperor!’”<sup>21</sup>

## DRAGONFLY

The dragonfly (*qīngtíng* 蜻蜓), a symbol of summer, is a common motif in Chinese art and was especially popular on summer hair ornaments amongst the women of the imperial Chinese court. “Despite its imposing name in English, this insect is associated by the Chinese with the qualities of delicacy and transience ... a symbol of instability and evanescence.”<sup>22</sup> It also represents such ideals as those honored in the structured Confucian world where the importance of family name and reputation was an element of an ordered society.

The combination of a dragonfly and cabbage has already been discussed (see

CABBAGE p. 47), but there is a famous fan on display in the National Palace Museum in Taipei by the Southern Song (twelfth-century) painter Hsu Ti entitled “Insects and a Cabbage Plant,” that features a white butterfly, a dragonfly in flight, and a white locust grouped around a stem of Chinese cabbage.<sup>23</sup> Although a summer motif, such an arrangement also contains a moral message: the cabbage (*báicài* 白菜 or *qīngcài* 青菜) yields the expression *qīngbái* (清白), which means “pure,” while the dragonfly (*qīngtíng* 虫青蜓) depicted hovering nearby reinforces the *qīng*. The combination *bái* (白 “white”) and *qīng* (清 “pure”) means “stainless, pure.” The two are thus portrayed together to evoke the expression *qīngbái chuán jiā* (清白传家), or the sentiment that “pureness of character is a family heirloom.” The white butterfly (see p. 91) emphasizes the *bái* concept plus adds the idea of “old age,” while the locust (*huángchóng* 蝗虫), composed of the characters for “locust” and “insects,” is a play perhaps on another *chóng* that is found in the expression *chóngjìng* (崇敬) meaning “esteem, respect, revere.” This would be consistent with a message counseling us to respect what we can inherit from our ancestors – a pure reputation.

During the Ming Dynasty (CE 1368– 1644), a scene of dragonflies hovering above lotus ponds (*hé* meaning “lotus” as well as “peace”) was a popular decorative motif, the picture of “clear, peaceful waters” symbolizing political stability.

## FISH

The fish is a very ancient Chinese decorative motif (Fig. 181). Its earliest forms are seen on pottery excavated from the Banpo site dating back to approximately 5000 BCE. “Fish, frog and wave designs repeated on pottery served religious functions as primitive totems.”<sup>24</sup> Scholars also believe that the fish (and other aquatic creatures) were all strongly associated with the dragon and contributed to the eventual evolution of the “dragon culture characteristic of China.”<sup>25</sup>

Over time, the prehistoric pottery designs became more sophisticated. Pairs of fish appear from the Zhou Dynasty, but it was possibly the introduction of Buddhism into China that made them a particularly popular motif. From approximately the Tang Dynasty, “fish designs on porcelain ... [became] more delicate and luxurious in tandem with improved pottery techniques. In the Song (CE 960– 1279) and Yuan (CE 1280–1367) Dynasties, there were more and more



ink paintings of fish,”<sup>26</sup> although the fish most strongly associated with the Yuan are probably those that appear as central motifs on the period’s large dishes.

Fish paintings became very popular amongst the literati, for whom they represented the qualities of contemplation and reflection. The act of fishing represented thought and inspiration, and painting fish that appeared natural – as if they could dart away in a flash – became an admired accomplishment. Fish from this genre are thus always portrayed in natural surroundings, with lilies or reeds as their companions. Interestingly, “only fish from lakes and rivers were considered acceptable for depiction.”<sup>27</sup>

Fishing was also understood to be an activity of those heroes, scholars, misunderstood philosophers, poets, and other eccentrics who had chosen to leave the world of the city and politics. The Daoist philosopher Zhuāngzi (庄子) declared “to his friend that he knows the joy of fish. Ever since, the happiness attributed to fish has come to symbolize an ideal, secluded and peaceful life.”<sup>28</sup> Perhaps these fishermen are only biding their time, perhaps not; but there are many beautiful scrolls depicting lone fishermen who should be interpreted as not mere fishermen but as intellectual refugees.

In sharp contrast with this philosophical symbolism, fish have a more popular meaning with the masses based on the homophonous relationship that “fish” (yú 鱼) share with “surplus, abundant” (yú 余) (Fig. 183). This explains why the blue-and-white fish pattern porcelain plate or bowl is so ubiquitous in China. Who would not wish their dinner bowls to be always overflowing? Hence, fish symbolize plenitude and abundance, be it food, offspring, wealth, or other riches.

A common theme in both traditional and popular “primitive” Chinese folk art is a village pond teeming with fish to represent the desire for success and wealth. Modern Chinese New Year hangings often feature embroidered carp and coins. Carp, perch, and catfish are also popular porcelain and scroll motifs, for a variety of reasons discussed below,<sup>29</sup> although they are also found in the simplest forms, such as cloth mobiles hanging over a newborn’s crib. It is permissible to depict “New Year” fish out of their natural surroundings, either on a platter or being held by an obviously healthy, well-fed male child dressed in traditional New Year garb (Fig. 182). Political correctness allowed these paintings to incorporate young female children only in the recent past.

A fish’s head is considered especially auspicious, and is therefore always the delicacy at a New Year banquet, because “fish head” (yútóu 鱼头) can also be

interpreted as “the beginning of wealth” (*yútóu* 余头). This could also be the reason why the young scholar depicted as the God of Literature or Examinations holding his calligraphy brush stands on the head of a fish – passing one’s examinations being the first hurdle in a successful career.

The scale-covered **carp** (*lǐ* 舍里) is identifiable by its wide mouth and two pairs of barbels attached to its upper lip. The carp also has a long dorsal fin. It is especially popular as its name is homophonous with the *lì* meaning “profit” (利) and another *lì* (力) meaning “power, strength, ability.” Both puns explain the popularity of ceramic statues of fishermen dangling fishing lines (in search of “profit”) and the successful fisherman holding a large carp. These scenes are expressed in Chinese as *yúwēng délì* (渔翁得利) or “the old fisherman stands to benefit.” Basically, fish in Chinese art, most often represented by carp and/or goldfish, represent wealth. Especially popular are pictures of fat little boys holding a correspondingly fresh fat carp in their arms, symbolizing the wealth of male progeny and abundant riches.

Carp amongst lotuses (*lián* 莲), especially when linked or entwined (*lián* 连),<sup>30</sup> or depicted with two or more lotus flowers on a single stalk (*liánlián yǒu yú* 莲莲有鱼), represent both visually and symbolically the concept of continually (“again and again,” *liánlián* 连连) having excess (or surplus, *yú* 余) wealth. *Liánlián* also sounds very similar to *niánnián* (年年), which means “year after year.” The beauty of these pictures is that they reinforce the basic messages using a variety of different symbols – through the word for “fish,” the word for “carp,” showing more than one fish, one or more lotuses, etc.

Pictures of fish spouting bouquets of flowers are to be understood as symbolic of the desire to enjoy both wealth and whatever attributes the flowers symbolize, for example, peonies with wealth and rank. Carp swimming “in succession” (*liánlián* 连连) represent the auspicious design *liánlián délì* (连连得利) or “again and again gaining profits.”

The Chinese were very mindful of the nature of fish that emboldens them to fight against the most powerful river currents, the most common example being the Chinese carp, which is not unlike the Western salmon. The Chinese traditionally believed that during the third moon of each year, carp would swim up the Yellow River (Fig. 187). Those that succeeded in passing the rapids in Hunan, known as the Dragon Gate, were transformed into dragons (perhaps a carp’s scales and whiskers explain the association).<sup>31</sup> Carp, particularly jumping

or leaping carp, thus represent determination, perseverance, and accomplishment in Chinese art and poetry, and particularly in academic arenas. Young boys' caps and shoes used to be embroidered with carp to inspire them to persevere in their studies, and a spirited leaping carp was believed to be an inspirational motif on such scholars' accessories as brushpots and paperweights (Figs. [185](#), [186](#), [190](#)). The consequence of such academic success was, of course, career advancement as a literati, with its attendant privileges of wealth and power.



**Fig. 181 The character at the top of this large porcelain jar decorated with fish reads “fish” (yú). Fish are rich symbols in Chinese art, representing on one level the secluded, simple life of the countryside, and on another level the more urbane meaning of “surplus,” as in having enough to eat with leftovers.**



Fig. 182 A traditional Chinese New Year painting featuring a young boy holding a fat fish and lotus, symbolizing the desire for prosperity in the year to come. The caption reads (from right to left) *lián nián yǒu yú* or “wealth year after year.”

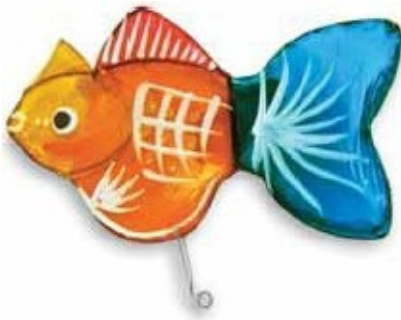


Fig. 183 A lantern in the shape of a fish is an especially auspicious decoration.





Fig. 184 Drawing of a blue-and-white jar depicting goldfish swimming amongst lotus and pondweed. This literal depiction of “goldfish with lotus” is a rebus that wishes the viewer or recipient of the item “surplus harmony and wealth” and was a popular decoration for newlyweds. Note that the knob on the top of the jar is in the shape of a lotus bud. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

**Goldfish** (*jīnyú* 金鱼), which are domestic variants of wild carp, are equally popular symbols in Chinese art as their name is a homophone for the two symbolic components of material success in Chinese life: “gold” (*jīn* 金, the same



*jīn* in “goldfish”) and “jade” (*yù* 玉) (Fig. [189](#)). Furthermore, another *yù* with the same sound and tone as “jade” (*yù* 玉) means “surplus” (*yú* 余). Hence, when combined with other components, the variety of good wishes and felicitations that can be expressed in paintings of goldfish is almost endless. For example, a pond teeming with goldfish (*jīnyú* 金鱼) is a visual representation of *jīnyú* or “gold (*jīn* 金) in surplus (*yú* 余).”



Fig. 185 A carp almost overwhelms this young boy's hat.



Fig. 186 From tip to toe, young children are reminded that they will need to struggle like the valiant carp to succeed in life. A pair of felt shoes to clad young feet. Purchased in Yunnan.



Fig. 187 During the third moon of each year, carp swim up the Yellow River. Those that succeed in passing the rapids in Hunan, known as the Dragon Gate, are believed to be transformed into dragons, an allegory that is used to teach young children the virtues of perseverance. This nineteenth-century porcelain brushpot depicts a young carp working its way upstream and the reward at the top that awaits him if he is successful.

Another common design is of a goldfish (*jīnyú* 金鱼) wrapped (*bāo* 包) in a lotus leaf (*hé* 荷), which can be read as “a surplus or abundance of gold in your purse” (*hébao jīnyù*). *Hébao* (荷包) refers to a small purse, *jīn* (金) means “gold,” and *yú* (余) means “surplus.”

Another popular design used to decorate wedding gifts is a goldfish (*jīnyú* 金鱼) with (*hé* 和) a lotus (*hé* 荷) or a lotus held by the stem in its mouth (Fig. 184). This literal depiction of “goldfish with lotus” (*jīnyúhéhé* 金鱼和荷) when shuffled around becomes *jīnyú héhé* (金余和和), which wishes the new couple “surplus (*yú* 余) harmony (*hé* 和) and (*hé* 和) wealth (*jīn* 金)” – a good foundation for any marriage.

**Catfish** or **mudfish** (*nián* 鲇) are homophonous with “year” (*nián* 年) and were attached in pairs to other objects with double meanings to add the wish “year after year.”<sup>32</sup> This motif is even found on imperial dragon robes in both the Ming and late Qing Dynasties. Cammann describes one Twelve Symbol imperial robe as displaying a pair of catfish against a swastika background together with bats to create the expression *niánnián wàn fú* (鲇鲇万蝠) or “May you year after year [experience] unlimited blessings” (*niánnián wàn fú* 年年万福). Variations on this theme include red bats and other symbolic elements, for example, a variation

of the robe described above would be a catfish (*nián* 鲇) lying on two swastikas (*wàn wàn* 万万) while red bats (*hóngfú* 红蝠) hover above it. This pun, once interpreted, would read *wàn wàn nián hóng fú* (万万年洪福) or “For 10,000 times 10,000 years may you have vast good fortune.”

A very common decoration is a hanging wood, silk, or stone pendant of two fish (*yú* 鱼) dangling below a stone chime (*qìng* 磬) (Fig. 188). This “chime and fish” (*qíngyòuyú* 磬又鱼) combination is a pun on the expression *jíqìng yòuyú* (吉庆又余), which reads “[May you] have (*yǒu* 有) a surfeit (*yú* 余) of happiness and joy (*jíqìng* 吉庆).”

Depictions of pairs of fish are found as early as the Zhou Dynasty (1027–256 BCE), and almost certainly predate this period as they are found in the ancient Babylonian zodiac (think Pisces, February 19–March 20, in the Western calendar), although their early symbolism is unclear.<sup>33</sup> Buddhism uses the motif of a pair of fish as one of the Eight Buddhist Symbols (see p. 242), commonly said to symbolize freedom from the wrong thoughts that bind one to existence and the freedom that truth brings the believer. This is a decidedly Buddhist perspective of an ancient Chinese symbol that is also used in Daoism at times as a highly artistic rendition of *yīn/yáng*, but which is also associated with marital bliss and fidelity,<sup>34</sup> or just plain fecundity.

Once a traditional wedding gift, a pair of fish has come to represent the union of a married couple.<sup>35</sup> A fish (*yú* 鱼) depicted in water (*shuǐ* 和) conveys the meaning “May [the two of] you be as harmonious (*héxié* 皆) as fish and water” (*yúshuǐ héxié* 鱼水和谐). *Xié* can mean both “in harmony” (*xié* 皆) and “together with” or “in the company of” (*xié* 偕), as with a married couple, hence the evolution of the idea that a pair (*shuāng*) of fish (*shuāngyú* 鱼鱼) symbolizes harmony, fertility, and conjugal bliss as well as “double surplus” (*shuāngyú* 余余).



Fig. 188 One of the most ubiquitous decorations found in Chinese homes or dangling from rearview mirrors of vehicles is two fish hanging from a pendant in the shape of an ancient stone chime. This “chime and fish” combination is a pun that is to be understood as “May you have an abundance of happiness and joy” (*jíqìng yǒuyú*), as the four characters at the top of the charm, from right to left, demonstrate. See also p. [248](#).



Fig. 189 Detail from a large fish pot of a fat goldfish, representing wealth.



Fig. 190 A small carp sits atop a young boy's hat to remind him to be as diligent a scholar as possible so that one day he will emerge as a dragon.

Two carp poised with a pearl between them (similar to the emblems of two

dragons sharing a pearl) use the pearl to symbolize all riches, hence the acquisition of wealth and treasure.

Four freshwater fish together represent *qīngbái liánjié* (清白廉洁) or “Be spotless and incorruptible.”<sup>36</sup> There are some interesting blue-and-white Ming ceramic plates with four fish surrounded by different flowers in the Topkapi Saray Collection in Istanbul.

If you should discover a fiercely carved stone “fish” with what look like tusks, horns, and sharp teeth, it most likely is not a fish but a *makara*, a creature associated with Buddhism that found its way into China from Tibet during the Yuan Dynasty, for a brief while before disappearing in China. It features prominently, however, in Indonesian and Southeast Asian Buddhist art (see p. [136](#)).

Although there are indeed **dragons** which live in rivers, wells, and the sea, and dragons have traditionally been categorized with fish by the Chinese, they are discussed under REAL AND IMAGINARY ANIMALS (see p. [121](#)).

## FIVE POISONOUS CREATURES

**Centipedes, lizards, scorpions, toads, and vipers** represent the Five Poisonous Creatures (*wǔdú* 五毒) that can threaten life (Fig. [166](#)).<sup>37</sup> To ward off their venomous dangers, their image was, and still is, gaily and often most creatively embroidered on children’s caps, slippers, bed covers, and clothing (Fig. [191](#)). Usually combined with the five creatures is either a picture of a tiger or the Chinese character *wáng* (王), which means “king.” Because this sign is said to appear on the forehead of tigers, it is believed to protect children from these small, deadly dangers just as a tiger itself would (see TIGER p. [145](#)).

The *wǔ dú* motif is associated with the summer solstice, which falls on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, the longest day of the year in the northern hemisphere, traditionally when insects came out of hibernation, but most importantly when the year would begin to turn *yīn* (Fig. [192](#); see also Fig. [9](#)). In China, this date is known as Zhòngwǔ jié (重五节). It was the day when the emperor performed annual sacrifices and prayers at the Altar of Earth, just as the winter solstice was the day when the calendar would begin to turn *yáng*, requiring sacrifices and prayers at the Temple of Heaven to ensure the sun’s



arrival. Just as the dragon was associated with *yáng*, the tiger was associated with *yīn*, hence its appearance on festival badges and other items depicting the *wǔdú* motif. In Imperial China, on this “most dangerous day” of the year, upper-class families often exchanged cakes decorated with the Five Poisonous Creatures.



Fig. 191 A young mother stitches some of the decorative folk toys still made in China today. Note which animals are depicted, including the toad pillow at her feet. (See Fig. 166.) Contemporary folk painting.



Fig. 192 An embroidered badge that would have been worn for the festivities surrounding the summer solstice, featuring the Five Poisons and the tigers and auspicious plants (calamus, also known as sweet flag, and artemisia, also known as mugwort) that will protect you from them. 36 x 37 cm. Courtesy of the Chris Hall Collection Trust (on loan to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore).





Fig. 193 Frogs are associated with rain and water and hence are the perfect shape for a calligrapher's or scholar's water pot. Monochrome white glaze decorated with a pearl motif finish. Interior with turquoise blue enamel which was a favorite stylistic feature of some utilitarian porcelain of this period. 11 x 4.5 cm. 1820–75. Jǐngdézhèn, Jiangxi Province.



Fig. 194 A tiny frog (*qǐngwā*) sits on the edge of a giant lotus leaf in this Chinese inkstone. Note the pair of ducks that symbolize marital fidelity. The presence of the ducks confuses what is normally a very scholarly, and hence male, artifact and may add the notion of a child since we know that in some parts of China women call their children *wá*.



Fig. 195 A reproduction Peking Glass water pot decorated in swimming, leaping, and sitting frogs amidst lotus. 5 x 8 cm.

The fifth day of the fifth lunar month is also the date commemorating the death of Qū Yuán (屈原, 343–277 BCE), a great poet and statesman who committed suicide by drowning himself in protest during the Warring States Period (481–221 BCE) (see p. [168](#)).

## FROG

Frogs (*qīngwā* 青虫圭) represent fertility, which is why, according to one Chinese scholar, “women call their children *wá* (娃, child)” (Figs. [193-195](#)). Frogs are associated with Nǚwā (女女尚), the First Ancestress, and in pictures sometimes even represent her. Frogs are associated with rain and moisture in most of Asia and are found decorating some of the bronze drums used in rites to summon rain by ethnic groups (but not the indigenous Han people) in southern China, Vietnam, and other regions of Southeast Asia. They are also said to come from the moon, hatching from eggs that fall from the sky with the dew. One of the more fascinating earlier representations of a frog found in China decorates a 9 inch (20 cm) long bronze horse forehead guard. “Its upper part takes the form of a frog supporting itself on its two front legs; the lower body comprises two entwined snakes.”<sup>39</sup> It dates to the Warring States Period during the Donghu era and was believed to be a charm, its purpose being to protect the horse.<sup>40</sup>

There is some confusion between frogs and toads in Chinese art, evidenced by the fact that many of the embroidered pillows identified as “frog” pillows actually depict the “five poisons” associated with toads. Sometimes the three-legged “money toad” is also referred to as a “frog” – which it is not. See TOAD p. [104](#).

## GOLDFISH

See FISH p. [98](#).

## KATYDID

See CRICKET p. [95](#).

## LIZARD.

See FIVE POISONOUS CREATURES p. [100](#).

## MUDFISH

See FISH p. [99](#).

## SCORPION

See FIVE POISONOUS CREATURES p. [100](#).

## SHRIMP

Shrimps (*xiā* 虫下) are a popular motif. Contemporary Chinese arts and crafts departments abound with paper scrolls, rock carvings, and silk embroideries of schools of shrimps because of their homophonous relationship with *xiá* (遐), which means “advanced age” (Figs. [196](#), [197](#)). Such a scroll or carving makes a nice gift for an older person, but not for a youth! A gold filigree hairpin in the Palace Museum collection in Beijing depicts two shrimps alongside the character *shòu* (“longevity”) to reinforce the connection.





Fig. 196 The word for shrimp sounds similar to another word that means “advanced age,” hence all the pictures and carvings of schools of shrimp cry out “May you and your friends grow old together!” Detail from a scroll.



Fig. 197 Detail of a magnificent carving of a school of shrimp. Courtesy of Tang Horse Pte Ltd, Singapore.



Fig. 198 A modern papercut of a snake, one of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac.

## SNAKE

The only snake (*shé* 蛇) one is likely to find in modern Chinese art will be on children’s clothing, hats, and textiles, depicted as one of the Five Poisonous Creatures (see p. [100](#)).<sup>41</sup> Snakes do have an ancient symbolism, however, and archaeologists have found bronzes of snakes, often holding a fish in their mouths, or wrapped around objects, dating back to Neolithic times (see, for example, Figs. [383-385](#), where the Mother and Father of Mankind are depicted with snake tails). They also appear on Shang art and, later on, monuments and steles entwined with a tortoise (with whom they are believed to mate),

representing the direction north as one of the Four Spiritual, Supernatural, or Intelligent animals (see TORTOISE p. [198](#)).



Fig. 199 Spiders are seen as bringing good luck and are usually referred to as “good luck” or “happiness” spiders. This dainty little spider appears on a contemporary porcelain brushpot alongside crickets, a leaf insect, and dragonflies. Height 22 cm.



Fig. 200 A frog watches a good luck spider hanging from a thread in this detail from a small piece of embroidery.



Fig. 201 Although worn, the design embroidered on this small silk purse remains clear – a spider, swastika, *rúyi*, pomegranate, rhinoceros horn, and other auspicious symbols to wish its owner boundless good luck.



Fig. 202 A spider hangs by a thread above five bats and a stylized character *shòu* (“longevity”) on this embroidered nineteenth-century fan case. The spider is a pun on the word “happiness” and the five bats represent the Five Happinesses of wealth, health, longevity, a virtuous life, and a natural death.

## SPIDER

Spiders (*zhīzhū* 淀蛛) are regarded as bringing good luck and are usually referred to as “good luck” or “happiness spiders” (*xǐzi* 喜子) because they descend from above (*tiānlái* 天来), just as bats or “happiness” descends from heaven (Figs. [199-202](#)).

The author has in her collection a lady’s “lotus slipper” embroidered with a

little good luck spider, and one art historian describes an envelope depicting a box “that has been opened; in the raised lid appears a spider web, and the insect itself dangles from it on the end of a thread.”<sup>42</sup> The key to deciphering this charming picture is in understanding that *kāifēng xiànxǐ* can be read either as “When one opens (*kāi* 开) that which is sealed (for example, the envelope, *fēng* 封), a spider (*xǐ* 喜) will appear (*xiàn* 见)” or “When opened, abundant (*fēng* 丰) joy (*xǐ* 喜) will appear.”

Red spiders are especially lucky, not only because red is a lucky color but because “red” (*hóng* 红) also has a homophone that means “vast” (*hóng* 洪), so red spiders can be interpreted as “vast happiness.” The Palace Museum collection in Beijing possesses a pair of jeweled gold hair ornaments once intended for ladies of the imperial household, each consisting of a blue enamel gold leaf upon which rests a red spider. Another hair ornament in the same collection combines a spider with squash, expressing the wish that the joy will be in the form of many offspring.

Unfortunately, you may see a spider accompanied by a centipede, toad, viper, and lizard in a popular grouping known as the Five Poisonous Creatures. This is a mistake on the part of modern craftspeople or artisans who do not know the traditional symbolisms, as spiders have always been considered lucky in Chinese folk art and would never be regarded as “evil” or “dangerous”.

## TOAD

The most common toad (*chánchú* 蟾蜍 or just plain *chán*) one sees in Chinese decorative arts is the “money toad” (*qiánchán* 钱蟾), frequently also referred to as the three-legged toad (*sānjiǎochán* 三脚蟾), usually depicted with a coin or coins in its mouth, often with a young boy riding on its back or a spray of pomegranates in its mouth to express the wish “May you have the double riches of wealth (symbolized by the coins) and sons (symbolized by the child or pomegranate bough)” (Figs. [204-206](#)).

The boy is Liú Hǎi (刘海), who is said to live on the moon, and who is sometimes referred to as the God of Coins or a lesser God of Wealth (Fig. [203](#)). Because he has captured a toad with the ability to spit out silver and gold coins, the toad has become associated with the acquisition of wealth as well as the moon and immortality (Fig. [205](#)). Liú Hǎi is one of the most popular figures in



Chinese art and is found everywhere: on scrolls, as a bronze statue or woodcarving, or even decorating a dainty glass snuff bottle (see p. [163](#)).

Sometimes, the God of Wealth (see p. [161](#)) is depicted with this three-legged “money toad” and sometimes, because of its association with immortality, with one of the Eight Immortals (see p. [176](#)). Zhāng Gu ǎlǎo (张果老), another of the Eight Immortals, who is more commonly shown riding a white donkey, is occasionally depicted, for example, riding a toad instead (see p. [179](#)).

The toad’s (*chán* 蟾) strong love of money has caused it to be an apt homophone for *chán* (馋), “greed, gluttony.”

According to one variant of a well-known Chinese folk tale, the three-legged toad is none other than the Goddess of the Moon (see p. [206](#)), Cháng’ér (嫦娥), who was transformed into a toad for her sin of stealing the elixir of immortality from her husband Hòu Yì, the Archer (后羿), who inhabits the sun. Yì had been given the elixir of immortality by the Queen Mother of the West (Xī Wángmǔ 西王母) as a sign of her favor. This toad is thus responsible, when it swallows the moon, for eclipses. Its counterpart is the three-legged raven or cock associated with the sun. A poetic name for the moon is *chángōng* (蟾宫), literally “toad palace.”

If you find a painting or carving of a toad within a circle, it represents the moon, just as a picture of a three-legged bird within a circle represents the sun (see MOON p. [159](#)). Because of its association with the moon, immortality, and wealth, the toad is also shown together with such auspicious objects as mushrooms and plum blossoms on such unexpected accessories as hair ornaments.



Fig. 203 This amulet, which would have been carried for good luck, depicts Liú Hǎi with his ropes full of the coins that have been gathered for him by his clever money-gathering toad. Courtesy of Vladimir Belyaev. For more on Chinese amulets and ancient coinage, visit the site <http://www.charm.ru>.



Fig. 204 Here is the real thing – a money toad with a coin in its mouth.



Fig. 205 Another variation of a money toad (*qiánchán*) with a coin in its mouth but this time surrounded by ingots rather than coins. These ingots are an old form of Chinese currency. See p. [251](#).



Fig. 206 Want to keep money in your purse? Add the design of a three-legged toad, famed for bringing its owner riches. The embroidered swirls are most likely *rúyì* heads, adding the idea of as many riches “as you desire.”

The toad is a bona fide member of the Five Poisonous Creatures (see p. [100](#)), and as such is commonly depicted together with its four companions (centipede, lizard, scorpion, and viper) on children’s clothing and caps in order to protect the wearer from the evils these creatures represent. Chinese charms often depict a toad.

Most toads are depicted in Chinese art with only three legs. They are found as early as the Zhou Dynasty, although carved jade figurines exist from the Han. “Containers for liquids in the form of toads [frogs?] have been popular in China since early times and were made, for example, in ceramic at the Yue kilns during the third and fourth centuries AD.”<sup>[43](#)</sup>

A toad (*chán* 蟾) sitting on or with a lotus (*lián* 莲)<sup>[44](#)</sup> forms a homophone for the expression *chánlián* (婢联), which means “to hold a post or title one after another.” If you mentally attach the concept of “adding” (*jiā* 加), as in “add a lotus,” you get the basis for forming the rebus *yījiǎ chánlián* (一甲婢联), which expresses a desire to be placed in the top rank of all of the now-vanished civil service examinations of Imperial China, one after another (*yījiǎ* adding the meaning of “the first or top”).

## TORTOISE

The tortoise (*guī* 龟), one of the four revered ancient animals of China, symbolizes the direction north and is often depicted entwined with a snake (Fig. [207](#)). Tortoises represent the creation of all beings in Chinese folklore, in part because one is attributed with having carried the *Book of the Luo River* (*Luòhéshū* 洛河书) and its secrets on its back to the First Ancestor Fúxī (伏羲), who used it to invent all things, including divination.<sup>[45](#)</sup>

This tortoise is commonly depicted in Chinese art, both in paintings and in carvings (for example, decorating a brush washing pot),<sup>[46](#)</sup> the manuscripts bound to the tortoise's back with flowing ribbons to accentuate its auspiciousness.

Tortoises also represent longevity since they were believed to live for 10,000 years. The combination of a Zhou Dynasty *bì* (璧) jade disk and a tortoise is a rebus meaning “the certain attainment of old age,” as a homophone of *bì* (必) has the meaning “surely.”<sup>[47](#)</sup>

Understanding the cultural importance of passing the civil service examinations and being familiar with some palace architecture in Imperial China give you the clues to interpreting another common theme – that of a “first-class bird” (a crane or stork) standing at the head of a tortoise (see CRANE p. [69](#) and STORK p. [87](#)). If you have visited any traditional Chinese palaces, you will have noted the stone figures of dragons and tortoises by the base of the steps leading up into the main halls (Fig. [208](#)). In ancient times, the examination candidates who had passed were lined up and presented to the emperor, usually (although not always) by rank. Standing by the head of a tortoise thus meant being top of the class and portrayed career success with its resultant status, wealth, and power.

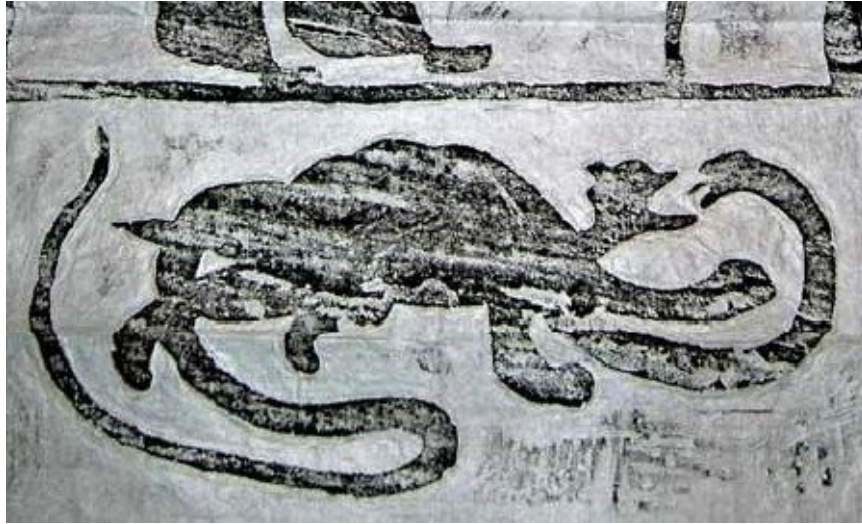


Fig. 207 Detail of a rubbing from a Han Dynasty tomb depicting a snake wrapped around a black tortoise in an ancient form known as *xuánwǔ*, the Black Warrior. The tortoise is one of the four revered ancient animals of China, and symbolizes the direction north. Courtesy of Liu Baisha.



Fig. 208 Statue of a bronze tortoise or mythical dragon-turtle (*anáo*) in Beijing's Forbidden City.

Tortoise shell was also prized and used as a decorative object to make, for example, flat hairpins and bangles during the Qing Dynasty, often encrusted with pearls, jade, and precious stones, imparting their attributes as well as those of the tortoise's longevity to their owners.

## VIPER

See FIVE POISONOUS CREATURES p. [100](#).

## WASP

See BEE p. [91](#).





Fig. 209 A metal tortoise lock with a second smaller tortoise poised on the larger tortoise's tail. Locks in the form of bats, tortoises, and other auspicious animals are commonly found in China.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Shen Fu, the autobiographical author of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, as described in H. L. Li, *Chinese Flower Arrangement*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Hedera House, 1956, p. [26](#).
- <sup>2</sup> A famous Chinese saying, “Ants can move Mount Taishan” (*mǎyībān Tàishān* 蚂蚁搬泰山), underscores the united strength even the smallest creatures can generate when working together.
- <sup>3</sup> Honeybees are known specifically as *mìfēng* (蜜蜂).
- <sup>4</sup> Sotheby's, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, auction catalogue, New York, March 23, 2004, p. [116](#).
- <sup>5</sup> Susan Whitfield, *Life Along the Silk Road*, London: John Murray, 1999, p. [147](#).
- <sup>6</sup> Yang Xianrang and Yang Yang, *Chinese Folk Art*, Beijing: New World Press, 2000, p. [77](#).
- <sup>7</sup> Ong Hean-tatt, *Chinese Animal Symbolisms*, Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 1993, p. [263](#).
- <sup>8</sup> Schuyler Cammann, *China's Dragon Robes*, New York: Ronald Press, 1952, p. [102](#).
- <sup>9</sup> Emma C. Bunker, “Late Antique Motifs on a Textile from Xinjiang Reveal Startling Burial Beliefs,” *Oriental Art*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2004, pp. [30–6](#).
- <sup>10</sup> “Liáng Shānbó and Zhù Yīngtái” (梁山伯与祝英台) is available in both Chinese and English translations as one of China's most popular folk stories. The musical piece is known by the names of the two lovers, “Liángzhù” (梁祝).
- <sup>11</sup> Wolfram Eberhard (trans. G. L. Campbell), *Times Dictionary of Chinese Symbols: An Essential Guide to the Hidden Symbols in Chinese Art, Customs and Beliefs*, Singapore: Federal Publications, 1990, p. [52](#).
- <sup>12</sup> Roberta Helmer Stalberg and Ruth Nesi, *China's Crafts: The Story of How They're Made and What They Mean*, New York: Eurasia Press, 1980, p. [62](#). Similarly, carved jade pigs were placed in the deceased's hands to assure wealth in the world to come. While originally beautifully carved, by the time of the Eastern Han (9–220 CE) they were carved with only a few cuts that became known as “Eight Han cuts” or *hàn bādāo* (汉叉叉刀), suggesting limbs, snout, and other features.
- <sup>13</sup> A picture of this beautiful object may be found in A. and J. Speelman, *Chinese Sculpture and Works of Art 2002*, London: A. & J. Speelman, 2002, p. [106](#).

- [14](#) Ni Yibin, “The Anatomy of Rebus in Chinese Decorative Arts,” *Oriental Art*, Vol. 49, No. 3, [2004], pp. [20–3](#).
- [15](#) Schuyler Cammann, *Substance and Symbols in Chinese Toggles: Chinese Belt Toggles from the C. F. Bieber Collection*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962, p. [138](#) ff.
- [16](#) Wang Shixiang (trans. Hu Shiping and Yu Shuxun), *The Charms of the Gourd*, Hong Kong: Next Publication, 1993, p. [131](#).
- [17](#) Ibid., p. [63](#).
- [18](#) Ibid. According to Wang Shixiang, connoisseurs of such cages were very agitated when the young emperor Pūyí (溥儀) in the film *The Last Emperor*, was shown putting an insect in the wrong gourd cage – an error that never would have happened in the Forbidden City.
- [19](#) Tun Li-ch'en (trans. Derk Bodde), *Annual Customs and Festivals in Peking*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1987, p. [82](#).
- [20](#) See Loretta H. Wang, *The Chinese Purse: Embroidered Purses of The Ch'ing Dynasty*, 2nd edn, Taipei, Taiwan: Hilit Publishing, 1991, p. [27](#) and pp. [66–7](#) for photographs of typical examples of purses depicting crickets and grass; p. [41](#) depicts the same motif on an eyeglass case.
- [21](#) Wang Shixiang, *The Charms of the Gourd*.
- [22](#) T. C. Lai (ed.), *Things Chinese*, Hong Kong: Swindon Book Company, 1971, p. [53](#).
- [23](#) Wang Yao-t'ing (trans. Stone Studio), *Looking at Chinese Painting: A Comprehensive Guide to the Philosophy, Technique and History of Chinese Painting*, Tokyo: Nigensha Publishing, 1996, pp. [86–7](#).
- [24](#) “Fish in the Arts,” *Taipei Journal*, August 17, 2001.
- [25](#) Ibid.
- [26](#) Ibid.
- [27](#) Ibid.
- [28](#) Estelle Niklès, “Comme un poisson dans l’eau,” *Collections Baur*, Bulletin 63, juin 2001, p. [43](#).
- [29](#) They were especially popular painting subjects during the Ming Dynasty (CE 1366–1644).
- [30](#) Look carefully at these two characters and you will see that the only element differentiating them is the character that means “lotus,” which has three lines at the top that adds the concept “grass or plant.”
- [31](#) Lóngmén (龍門 Dragon Gate) is a cataract actually located on the Yellow River that carp would need to pass, swimming upstream against strong currents and rapids, in order to reach their spawning grounds. The Japanese borrowed this tradition, which is why carp kites and flags are flown on Boys’ Day in Japan.
- [32](#) Cammann, in *Substance and Symbols in Chinese Toggles*, p. [121](#), describes one such toggle in the Bieber Collection. The robe described is in the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.
- [33](#) W. Perceval Yetts, “Symbolism in Chinese Art,” lecture delivered at the China Society, London, January 18, 1912, Singapore: Cybille Orient Gallery, 1984, p. [10](#).
- [34](#) Stalberg and Nesi, *China’s Crafts*, p. [81](#).

- [35](#) We know that during the ninth and tenth centuries along China's Silk Road, a "bride's family's gifts traditionally included two sticks and two bowls with four red fish swimming in them, fish being symbolic of abundance. The wealthiest families sent sticks and fish made of gold." Whitfield, *Life Along the Silk Road*, p. [178](#).
- [36](#) According to Ni Yibin in "The Anatomy of Rebus in Chinese Decorative Arts," p. [16](#), the fish are *qing*, "dark torpedo-shaped round body ... *bo* [with a triangular small head and a silvery long body ... *lian* ... [with a biggish round head ... [and] *jue* ... a fish particularly in favour with the eremitic literati and frequently featured in their poems and paintings, characterised by its crooked back and distinctive black marks on the body."
- [37](#) Sometimes a spider appears instead of a lizard, but this is a mistake as spiders are regarded as good luck. See spider p. [104](#).
- [38](#) Yang Shixiang, *The Charms of the Gourd*, p. [97](#).
- [39](#) Item K9962, on loan from the National Museum of China for an exhibition at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, autumn 2006.
- [40](#) "The Donghu people are the earliest northern nomadic tribe recorded in the ancient Chinese histories." Claire Roberts and Geremie R. Barmé (eds.), *The Great Wall of China*, exhibition catalogue, Sydney: Powerhouse Publishing, 2006, p. [74](#).
- [41](#) Books discussing Imperial China's textiles will sometimes refer to "python robes." This was a term used to differentiate the lesser-clawed dragons (*mǎng* and others) from the five-clawed imperial dragons (*lóng*). Do not expect to see anything resembling a true python! See dragon p. [121](#).
- [42](#) Edouard Chavannes (trans. and illus. Elaine Spaulding Atwood), *The Five Happinesses: Symbolism in Chinese Popular Art*, New York: Weatherhill, 1973, p. [21](#).
- [43](#) The British Museum has a delightful blue-and-white *kendi* (a pouring vessel) in the shape of a toad dating from the late Ming (ca. 1590–1620) and they can also be seen in the collections "of the Sultans of Turkey in the Topkapi Saray Museum in Istanbul and those of the Shahs of Iran in the Ardebil Shrine, now in the Iran Bastan Museum, Teheran ... the Princessehof Museum, Netherlands...and the Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, London." Jessica Harrison-Hall, *Ming Ceramics in the British Museum*, London: British Museum Press, p. 283.
- [44](#) The author's husband has a beautiful carved jade toad seated on two lotus leaves spewing out wealth, bought in Hong Kong's jade market in the 1980s.
- [45](#) Tortoise shells were used for divination purposes in ancient China. The shells were placed in fires and the cracks that appeared were interpreted. Scholars believe tortoise shells were used because the physical shape of their cross-shaped plastron replicated the Chinese view of the world ("a central square surrounded by four quadrates"). Sarah Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle; Myth, Art and Cosmos in Early China*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991, p. [173](#).
- [46](#) See, for example, item #74 in Sotheby's, *Emperor and Scholar*, auction catalogue, Hong Kong, April 25, 2004.
- [47](#) Yetts, "Symbolism in Chinese Art," p. [27](#).



Fig. 210 A tiger in a bamboo grove represents “courage coupled with endurance.” Scroll. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.



## Chapter 6

# REAL AND IMAGINARY ANIMALS

Animals have been depicted in Chinese art since its earliest days to represent both the powers they possessed as well as the other, more temporal meanings as recorded in the Gānzhī (干支) System, a system that combined the Ten Heavenly Stems (a “hard” and “soft” version of each of the five basic elements of fire, wood, water, metal, and earth) with the Twelve Terrestrial or Earthly Branches, popularly represented by the twelve animals of the zodiac: the rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, cock, dog, and pig (Fig. 211). Together they form sixty (twelve by five) pairs. Time was thus measured in sixty-year cycles, with the passage of time associated with elements, directions, and animals.<sup>1</sup>

Depictions of these twelve animals did not appear on everyday objects until the Tang Dynasty (CE 618–907), when they became a popular decoration on tombs “in the form of ceramic (or, rarely, bronze or iron) sculptures, wall paintings, and decorated borders of engraved stone epitaph tablets. The Tang works may show the Twelve Animals as animals in their natural form, [or] as human beings holding animals, dressed in official robes.”<sup>2</sup>

One’s zodiac sign, as dictated by one’s birth year, remains a significant aspect of one’s personality and destiny to the Chinese. It is not enough to know one’s birth date in terms of a month and day (in fact, these are only of secondary importance) because it is believed that the animal ruling the year in which one was born will be a far more significant influence. The compatibility of a dog with a rabbit or a dragon with a cock is a favorite topic of light-hearted Chinese women’s magazines. Collecting carvings, pictures, or other representations of the animal for the year in which a person was born is still a popular Chinese hobby and the reason for the large number of scrolls and decorative statues that appear during each Chinese New Year. One’s birth animal is understood as playing a significant role in determining the direction one’s life will take.

Direction had long been associated with animals, as far back as Neolithic times, when each of the four quadrants of the sky was represented by an animal associated with a season: south by a red bird (*zhūquè* 朱雀),<sup>3</sup> west by a white tiger (*báihǔ* 白虎), east by a green dragon (*huánglóng* 黄龙), and north by a black tortoise (*xuánwǔ* 玄武), often entwined with a snake, a coupling known as the



Black Warrior (Figs. [212-215](#)).<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 211 A modern-day papercut depicting the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac, each animal reigning over a single year. Five full cycles, representing sixty years, is known as a Cycle of Cathay and explains why turning sixty is truly significant to the Chinese. The cycle begins with the year of the rat and continues with the ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig.





**Figs. 212–215** Direction has been associated with animals since Neolithic times in China when each of the four quadrants of the sky was represented by an animal further associated with a season: east by a green dragon, west by a white tiger, south by a red bird, and north by a black tortoise entwined with a snake. These four medallions can be seen on the courtyard before the entrance to Shanghai's famous 400-year-old Yuyuan (Yu Garden).



**Fig. 216** While the animal on the right can be identified as an elephant, it is hard to know what the animal on the left is given its strange feet and claws. These renditions of real and mythological animals were very commonly found, however, decorating porcelains of the time. Detail of a plate in the Topkapi Saray Museum collection. The museum has approximately 10,000 pieces, half dating from the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, and half from the Qing Dynasty.



Fig. 217 More exotic animals. The animal on the right, with its long tongue and pointed beak-like mouth, resembles no animal extant today except perhaps a camel, but the animal on the left is most likely a bear. Lions and bears resembled one another in Chinese art but lions often have curly manes and tails as opposed to the straight-haired manes and tails of bears. Detail from a plate in the Topkapi Saray Museum collection.

As constellations, the Red Bird constellations were visible late spring to summer in the southern hemisphere; autumn was marked by the stars of the White Tiger setting with the sun in the west; the Green Dragon was visible in the spring; and winter arrived when the Black Warrior rose in the northeast and set in the northwest.

These animals were known by many names, sometimes the Four Heraldic Animals or Divine Creatures (*sìlíng* 四灵), which later evolved into the Four Spiritual, Supernatural, or Intelligent Animals (*sìshén* 四神): the dragon, phoenix, tiger, and tortoise.<sup>5</sup> (They still remain popular subjects for sculpture in modern Chinese parks.) At times, a mythical creature known as a *qílín* (see p. 140) replaces the tiger. Groupings of four animals are found as early as the Warring States Period (481–221 BCE),<sup>6</sup> and tiles and bricks with such motifs have been found in Qin (221–206 BCE) and Han Dynasty (206 BCE–CE 220) tombs.<sup>7</sup> They were sometimes paired with the twelve animals of the Chinese calendar, as can be seen on Sui Dynasty (CE 581–618) bronze mirrors on display in London’s Victoria & Albert Museum and the Cleveland Museum of Art (Fig. 218). Over time, it was the dragon and the bird (more particularly the phoenix) that came to dominate, although the tortoise became a popular icon of long life and the tiger of protective powers.

In addition to the four compass directions, the Chinese added a fifth direction, “the center,” thereby forming a carefully constructed view of the universe. These and other related relationships formed the basis of the Chinese belief that all the elements of the heavens and earth were interrelated, with

animals possibly the causal force behind the changing of the seasons (bird overpowering dragon, white tiger overpowering bird, black tortoise overpowering white tiger, green dragon overpowering black tortoise). “In Han art, [their] pervasive appearance ... reflects a desire to center the owner within the favourable influences of the universe.”<sup>8</sup>

The earliest depictions of animals were lions, tigers, panthers, apes, rhinoceroses, and scores of mythological animals (Figs. 216, 217). Interestingly, animals were probably never regarded as sacred although they were at times considered to possess supernatural powers. “There is no Horus-falcon in China nor any temple of monkeys.”<sup>10</sup>

These early animals are found as statuary and in textile designs and were obviously significant as representing power and prowess. Some, such as the lion and the bear, attained such importance that they were eventually selected to serve as the means of identifying the rank of the emperor’s military officers. Rank badges (*bǔ zǐ* 补子, as they came to be known during the Qing Dynasty), or “mandarin squares,” were made in pairs, with one worn on the front, the other on the back of one’s court dress. Since during court functions all military officers stood to the right of the emperor (civil servants stood to the emperor’s left), the patches were designed so that the animals of both squares (front and back) faced towards the emperor. They have a long history of evolution, changing in both size – Ming badges tend to be larger, approximately 16 x 16 inches (40 x 40 cm), while those of the Qing are approximately 12 x 12 inches (30 x 30 cm) – and complexity. The list of rank animals also grew over time when the *qílín* was added to the list during the Kāngxī era (1661–1722).<sup>11</sup>

### Interrelationship of Animals with the World

Element	wood	fire	earth	metal	water
Direction	east	south	center	west	north
Color	blue-green	red	yellow	white	black
Animal	dragon	bird	dragon or <i>qílín</i>	tiger	snake/tortoise
Chinese Name of Sky Quadrant's	<i>qīnglóng</i> (青龙)	<i>zhūquè</i> (朱雀)	<i>huánglóng</i> (黄龙) or <i>Qílín</i> 麒麟	<i>báihú</i> <sup>9</sup> (白虎)	<i>xuánwú</i> (玄武)

Reigning Animal					
Season	spring	summer	*	autumn	winter
Associated Mountain	Tàishān (泰山)	Héngshān (衡山)	Sōngshān (嵩山)	Huàshān (华山)	Héngshān (恆山)

\* The four transient times of the year

### Rank Insignia for Military Officers of the Imperial Court

	Early Ming Dynasty (1391-1527)	Late Ming Dynasty (1527-1644)	Early Qing Dynasty (1652-1662)	Late Qing Dynasty (1662-1911)
First Grade	lion	lion	lion	<i>qilin</i>
Second Grade				lion
Third Grade	tiger or leopard	tiger	tiger	leopard*
Fourth Grade		leopard	leopard	tiger*
Fifth Grade	bear	bear	bear	bear
Sixth Grade	panther	panther	panther	panther
Seventh Grade				rhinoceros**
Eighth Grade	rhinoceros or	rhinoceros	rhinoceros	
Ninth Grade	seahorse	seahorse	seahorse	seahorse

After 1664; \* After 1759

But let us look at each animal to understand the role it plays in Chinese history, mythology, iconography, and art.





Fig. 218 Mirror with interlacing floral motifs and twelve zodiac animals. China, Sui Dynasty, 581–618. Bronze. Diam. 15.4 cm. © The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Drs Thomas and Martha Carter in honor of Sherman E. Lee 1995.336.

## APE

See MONKEY p. [137](#).

## ASS

See DONKEY p. [120](#).

## BADGER

The homophone *huān* in Chinese means both “badger” (獾) and “happiness” (欢), hence a pair (*shuāng* 双) of badgers (*huān* 獾) in Chinese art represents “double happiness” (*shuāngxī* 囍), the Chinese symbol of conjugal bliss. Raymond Li has a charming agate carving of two entwined badgers in his snuff bottle collection (depicted together with two peanuts, which represent fertility).<sup>[12](#)</sup> Badgers are usually combined with magpies (see p. [77](#)), which are associated with

impending good fortune or happiness in a pattern known as *huāntiān xǐ dì* (欢天喜地), usually translated as “boundless joy” (literally “happiness on heaven and earth”).



Fig. 219 A pair of earwarmers, each decorated with an applied bat. Notice the very small swastika signs on the bats' backs wishing the wearer “10,000” or “limitless good luck!”



Fig. 220 A small green ceramic water dropper (*shuǐ zhù*) in the shape of a bat.



Fig. 221 This pottery shard with the whimsical face of a bat has been fastened into the lid of a small

contemporary metal box.



Fig. 222 Red bats circulate in red clouds to symbolize abundant happiness and good fortune. Three homophones are at play on this glass snuff bottle – the bats, the clouds, and the color red. Note also the stylized *fú* character which means “happiness,” one of the homophones of “bat.”



Fig. 223 A bat is found at the end of the “tail” of this child’s hat, emphasizing the general wish that its bearer enjoy good fortune, its impending arrival announced by the magpie in the willow tree.

## BÁIZÉ

See QíLín, p. [140](#).

## BAT

Because “bat” (*fú* 蝠) and the wish for “good fortune, happiness” (*fú* 福) share the same sound, a picture of a bat has come to convey happiness and good luck (Fig.

[219](#)). Bats are so ubiquitous in Chinese art they have become highly stylized and occasionally overly embellished, which sometimes camouflages their identity. The curve of their wings is also similar to the shape of a fungus, which has its own symbolism (the *rúyì*), causing further confusion. Occasionally, it is impossible to tell whether the motif is a butterfly or a bat as the usually indicative antennae are also often overly embellished.<sup>[13](#)</sup> Examining the shape of the wings is one of the best ways of distinguishing between the two.

Bats are found everywhere – on embroidery, furniture, belt buckles, locks, hairpins, teapots, card cases, etc. (Figs. [220](#), [221](#), [223](#)). And because *yun* is a homophone for both “cloud” (yún 云) and “good fortune” (yùn 运), bats are almost invariably depicted flying in or around stylized clouds (Fig. [222](#)).

Red bats became popular on late Ming and Qing Dynasty ceramics<sup>[14](#)</sup> and textiles to symbolize extensive good luck, as the phoneme *hóng* means both “red” (红) and “vast, abundant” (洪) (Fig. [226](#)). Hence, red bats (*hóngfú* 红蝠) are a symbol of abundant good fortune (*hóngfú* 洪福). Red bats in a sky full of clouds employ the elements of red/vast (*hóng*) bats/luck (*fú*) similar to (*qí* 齐) the sky (*tiān* 天) in the rebus *hóngfú qítiān* or “happiness as vast as the sky” or, alternatively, *fúzi tiānlái*, which can be understood as “bats descend from the sky” (蝠子天来) or “happiness descends from heaven” (才虽子天来).<sup>[15](#)</sup>

An upside-down bat plays upon the pun of the phoneme *dào*, which can mean both “upside-down” (到) and “to arrive” (到). “Luck is arriving” in the form of an upside-down bat (or upside-down character *fú* 福) is often a New Year decoration.

Bats and dragons were a popular ceramic motif during the Qiánlóng (草乞隆, r. 1736–95) Period as they took advantage of two puns: bats for “good fortune” and dragons (*lóng* 龙) for “prosperity” (*lóng* 隆, the same character in the emperor’s name). The ceramic jars bearing this design, known as *fúlóngguàn* (福隆罐), have “a reign mark in seal-script on the base, [and are] often covered in light sky-blue (*tiān qīng*) or winter green (*dōng qīng*) monochrome glazes.”<sup>[16](#)</sup>

A bat (*fú* 蝠) on (*zài* 在) a coin with a square hole, known as an “eye coin” (*yǎnqián* 艮钱), forms the pun *fúzài yǎnqián* (才虽在艮前) or “happiness (*fú* 才虽) lies (*zài* 在) before (*qián* 前) [your] eyes (*yǎn* 眼)” (Fig. [224](#)). A bat brandishing a swastika on a ribbon is a visual rebus depicting “10,000 [i.e. lots of] blessings” (*wànfú* 万福), as the Chinese character for “10,000” (*wàn* 万) resembles the

Buddhist swastika.

Four bats depicted together represent the four high points of a man's life, also known as the Four Happinesses:

Sweet rain after a long drought.

Meeting an old friend in a foreign place.

The wedding night in the nuptial chamber.

The sight of one's name on the golden placard.<sup>17</sup>

The very familiar grouping of five bats (*wǔfú* 五蝠), known as the Five Blessings or Five Happinesses (*wǔfú* 五福), expresses the collective desire for wealth, health, longevity, a virtuous life, and a natural death (Figs. [225](#), [227](#), [228](#)). This design was especially popular during the Ming (CE 1368–1644) and early Qing (CE 1644–1911) Dynasties. Paper strips reading “May the five happinesses enter this door” (*wǔfú lín mén* 五福临门) were once a fashionable New Year charm pasted on doorways. Since one of the five bats represents “longevity,” sometimes the older, complex character for longevity itself (*shòu* 壽) or a peach (which represents longevity) is used, surrounded by the four remaining bats.

Groupings of eight bats represent the Eight Immortals (see p. [176](#))<sup>18</sup> (Fig. [229](#)).



Fig. 224 Glanced at, this metal lock depicts a bat (*fú*), which represents good luck or fortune, but notice the character for “longevity” (*shòu*) on its back and the small coins on the lock bolt, representing the rewards that come with an official position (*lù*), and you discover the full sentiment of *fúlùshòu*. Also note the *rúyì* curls along the bat's wings, which add the sentiment “as you desire” for a final reading of “May you have the happiness, wealth, and longevity that you desire.”





Fig. 225 Five bats surround the character *shòu* in the bottom of this small bowl with four sprays of plants, each depicting one of the four seasons of the year, to convey the wish that the viewer enjoy good fortune and longevity throughout the years.



Fig. 226 More red bats in red clouds symbolizing abundant happiness, but this time surrounding the character *shòu* for “longevity.” Cover of a modern porcelain sweet dish.



Fig. 227 Five bats, each representing one of the Five Happinesses, surround the character for “longevity” (*shòu*) with clouds (*yún*) for “good fortune” (*yùn*) filling out the design of this carved wooden medallion.



Fig. 228 A fanciful rendition of five bats surrounding the character *shòu* in the bottom center of this large celadon platter – one of the most ubiquitous and popular designs of both the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Note the *rúyì* border around the *shòu*.



Fig. 229 Eight bats swarm through cloud-filled skies representing the Eight Immortals on this large blue-and-white planter. If you look carefully at the right-hand side, you can just make out the sacred fungus of immortality, the *língzhī*. A *rúyì*-head border, often referred to as a “cloud collar” (*yún jiān*), derived from the head of the sacred fungus, sits just below the rim.



Fig. 230 This bear can be easily confused with a lion but its straight as opposed to curly mane and tail allow us to identify it as a bear. Insignia badge for the wife of a fifth-rank military official. Qing Dynasty, Yongzheng Period (1723–35). Embroidery on silk, 37 x 38 cm. Courtesy of Judith Rutherford, gifted to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2001.



Fig. 231 A stone bear from the tomb environs of one of the Han Emperor Wǔdì's (武帝, r. 141–87 BCE) favorites, Huò Qùbìng (霍去病), constructed to honor his many military successes against the Hun. Photographed while visiting the Màolíng (茂陵) Museum, summer 2006.



Fig. 232 One of four camels (two kneeling, two standing) found along the walkway of Beijing's Ming tombs. Courtesy of Angela Soeteber.

## BEAR

The power of some animals is so great that their pictures or representation alone are enough to ward off evil spirits or dangers (Fig. [231](#)). Two such examples are the bear and the cat: bears (*xióng* 熊) symbolize bravery and strength, much as they do in North American Native Indian art. Some beautiful carved jade figures of bears dating back to the Han Dynasty have been excavated, one near the tomb of the Han Emperor Yuándì (元帝, r. 48–33 BCE). “Bears seem to have been very popular figures in the Han zoomorphic repertoire, but were little used thereafter,” although we do find them occasionally gracing a snuff bottle or other piece of art.<sup>19</sup> The depiction of an eagle (*yīng* 鷹) and a bear (*xióng*) represents a hero (*yīngxióng* 英雄).<sup>20</sup> Raymond Li tells us that “Two bears watching each other [is said to represent] an intellectual competition between two heros” (*shuāngxióng dòuzhì* 双雄斗智).<sup>21</sup> Li has a very interesting agate snuff bottle in his collection with this motif.

Throughout the Ming and Qing Dynasties, an embroidered rank badge of a bear denoted a fifth-rank military officer (Fig. [230](#)). It is sometimes difficult to discern a bear from a lion on rank badges as they were highly stylized, but one helpful clue on Qing Dynasty badges is to look at the mane and tail – it is curly on the lion and straight on the bear; unfortunately, this test does not hold true on Ming badges.

## CAMEL

Camels (*luòtuó* 路马它) were known to the Chinese from the earliest of times. A



reference to them, for example, is found in the *Shānhǎ ijīng* (山海经) or *Guideways through Mountains and Seas*, a fourth to first century BCE encyclopedia of strange beasts and travels, which depicts on one of its plates a double-humped camel.<sup>22</sup> Such double-humped camels were indigenous to China and today can still be found in Xinjiang's Taklamakan Desert, an area bordering China and Mongolia, and the Lop Nur region in northwest China. They have no special symbolic meaning in Chinese art and appear only as exotic beasts of burden as they were the essential packbearers in the caravans traversing China the Silk Road. As such, they are often the subjects of early Chinese statuary, for example, as tomb figurines, both unglazed and as three-colored (*sāncǎi*) wares, and along many of the walkways leading to imperial tombs (Fig. [232](#)).



Fig. 233 This contemporary papercut of ten cats playing with a ball while a butterfly hovers above, cut in auspicious red-colored paper, represents the saying *shíquán shíměi* or “perfect in every way.” For an explanation of this saying, see ten, p. [231](#).

## CAT

According to legend, the domestic cat (*māo* 猫) was introduced into China by Buddhist monks, who made it “sacred for exterminating the rats that threatened the sacred books with destruction.”<sup>23</sup> An ivory seal with a cat motif dating from the Ming, believed to have been used by Buddhist monks, is in the collection of the Field Museum in Chicago.<sup>24</sup>

Linguistically, the sound for cat (*māo* 猫) resembles that for “octogenarian”



(*mào* 毫), so a picture of a cat chasing a butterfly (which represents a seventy-year-old), is a birthday wish that the recipient will reach the age of eighty (see BUTTERFLY p. 91). A cat with peonies conveys the wish that its recipient will have riches and honors in old age. The design of cats with peonies and butterflies is a very common modern papercut design, and “ten” (*shí* 十) cats illustrate the sentiment *shíquán shíměi* (十全十美) or “perfect in every way” (Fig. 233).

In the area of sympathetic magic, pictures of cats were once used to ward off mice and rats that might attack precious silkworms, thus cats are seen as the protector of silkworms. This is why you often find beautiful embroidered silk pictures of cats in modern Chinese department and gift stores. Cats were also sometimes coupled with dustpans in folk art to symbolize that once evil had been swept out of a home, a cat would keep it at bay.

Cats present something of a philosophical dilemma to the Chinese, for on the one hand, their ability to capture rodents that would destroy a family’s wealth (represented in the form of crops, especially cabbage) makes them desirable creatures (Fig. 234), but rural superstition also associates them with poverty as they are attracted to homes abundant with mice and rats – which are seen as auspicious to the Chinese for their ability to hoard things and accumulate wealth (see RAT, p. 142) – only to chase them away or worse yet, kill them! This confusion over the basic nature of cats persists into modern times and cats are still generally disliked in rural China.



Fig. 234 A cat with its captured rat decorates this embroidered purse, safeguarding the family's wealth as portrayed by the crops that grow below – a radish, turnip, and cabbage – all symbols of wealth based on the pun “cabbage” (*cài*) with “cash” (*cái*).

## DEER

Small jade deer (*lù* 鹿) amulets have been found that date back to the late Shang (Shang-Yin 1523–1028 BCE) and early Zhou (1027–256 BCE) Dynasties, and they have been regarded as auspicious animals since at least the Han (206 BCE–CE 220) (Fig. 236). During the periods when China was ruled by minority tribes that had a basis in hunting (such as during the Jin, CE 1115–1234), deer, bear, birds, and other animals together with “mountains and forests” were popular textile designs. Admired for their agility, strength, and speed, or perhaps used to reflect a chieftain's hunting prowess, deer are found carved in jade and brick in Jin tombs.<sup>25</sup>

At some point, however, deer became “auspicious” and consequently associated with the Daoist cults of immortality, especially spotted deer, who were believed to be able to locate the fungus of immortality (*língzhī*) (Fig. 237). Not only did people believe that deer could find and consume this special fungus, but it was also believed that it was because of this diet that their horns had such a special velvety, youthful texture, for this was where the fungus's powers were believed to be best absorbed. It did not hurt that the word for horn (*jíjiǎo* 倚角) contains the prolific Chinese *ji*, a phoneme that can be written many ways with many meanings, including *jí* (吉) “lucky or auspicious.” Hence, horns and antlers (*lùjiǎo* 鹿角) are extremely popular Chinese medicines that are found in all Chinese apothecary shops right up to the present day (most prized are the velvety antlers of the young animal, reputed to restore lost youth). There is still more than one department store in modern Hong Kong with a Roots and Antler Department on the heavily trafficked first floor where Western department stores locate cosmetics and perfumes.

There are two types of auspicious deer pictures: those where the deer is depicted under a pine tree (which represents longevity) and those without the pine.

Deer were believed to attain great age, so the appearance of a pine tree reinforces the message of longevity. Many of these scenes also contain the figure of *Lùxīng* (禄星), the God of Rank and Emolument, who is often depicted holding

a special *rúyì* scepter to wish viewers “long life and wealth for as long as desired.” You can identify him by his official court robes, dress jade belt, and the stone tablet or *rúyì* scepter he holds (see p. [160](#)).



Fig. 235 Tan Swie Hian’s “Nine-Colored Deer and the Bird” is a wonderfully sentimental and simultaneously fresh and modern rendition of a classic subject – a spotted deer. Ink and pigments on Chinese rice paper, 1988. Courtesy of Lim Peck Cheong.



Fig. 236 Hunting motifs featuring stags and game birds have a long history in Chinese art. Detail from a decorative stone frieze in the Beijing Hotel, Beijing.



Fig. 237 Spotted deer are believed to have the ability to locate the fungus of immortality, the *lingzhi*. This deer has not only found an entire patch of the precious fungus but also sports large, prominent horns, where it was believed that the fungus was best absorbed. Shanghai.



According to Chinese legends, the color of a deer's fur tells you how old it is: 1,000-year-old deer are depicted with gray fur, 5,000-year-old deer with white fur.

Deer shown minus the distinctive pine tree setting usually represent official position and wealth because the sound that means “deer” (*lù* 鹿) can also mean an “official’s salary” (*lù* 禄), which in feudal China typically guaranteed a good income or wealth. Hence, a picture of a deer also represents the wish that one will attain an official position with its financial benefits. In the Chris Hall textile collection, there is a Ming festival badge of a deer that, together with a *shòu* character and a swastika (*wàn* 万), form the rebus *wànshòu fúlù* (万寿福禄), “everlasting [wishes of] longevity, wealth, and good fortune.”<sup>26</sup>

There is another reason why deer are associated with scholarship and the literati class in classical Chinese history: one of the concluding rituals of the provincial examinations, which were the second step in the chain of three sets of examinations that had to be passed if one was to become an official in the Chinese civil service, was a party known as the Banquet of Auspicious Omens or, more literally, the Deer-cry Banquet (*lù míng yàn* 鹿鸣宴). “The banquet began to the sound of music. The text for this music was the poem from the *Book of Poetry*, ‘*Yu yu*, cry the deer,’ which describes a memorable entertainment given by an emperor for his officials and guests.”<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the agate cup in the shape of a deer that can be seen in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London dating back to approximately 1858–1910 was a gift to a hopeful candidate. Unfortunately, we will never know.

The word “deer” (*lù* 鹿) also sounds like the number six (*liù* 六), so if you encounter a picture of a deer with either a crane (*hè* 河) or a lotus (*hè* 六和), or standing by a river (*hé* 和), it could be a rebus suggesting the Six Harmonies (*liùhé* 六禾口) (Fig 238). The sound *he* also has a multitude of meanings, including “crane,” “lotus,” and “river,” as well as the relevant “harmony” (*hé* 和). The Six Harmonies refers to the six Buddhist ordinances, meaning “harmonies of the heaven, earth, north, south, east, and west,”<sup>28</sup> so *liùhé* became formulaic in Chinese to mean “the world in its entirety.”

If a deer and a crane are depicted in a springtime setting with a large Chinese Parasol Tree, also known as the Phoenix or Varnish Tree (*Firmiana simplex*), it is the pictorialization of the Chinese expression *liùhé tóngchūn* (六合同春) (Fig. 239). You can identify the Chinese Parasol Tree by its distinctive huge, five-lobed,



paw-shaped leaves, which measure up to 12 inches (30 cm) across. You already know that the deer and crane are proxies for “the world.” The Chinese Parasol Tree (*wútóng* 梧桐) provides us with another key as it stands in for the *tóng* (同) that means “the same, together.” So the rebus can be translated as “spring prevails and everything is flourishing.”

Pictures of 100 (*bǎi* 百) deer, or a white (*bái* 白) deer, or a cypress (*bǎi* 丰白) and a deer (*lù* 鹿), are all homophones for “100 blessings” (*bǎilù* 百禄) or “100 promotions”. Since 100 promotions (not to be taken literally, but rather to be understood as “many” promotions) would be accompanied by salary increases and other benefits, such a scene depicts career success in China’s civil service, with its accompanying wealth and perks.



Fig. 238 A deer (*lù*) sounds like the number “six” (*liù*), hence a deer with a crane (*hè*) standing by a river (*hé*) with lotus (*hè*) is usually the basis of a rebus suggesting the Six Harmonies, as shown on this drawing of a vase. The crane is perched on a Chinese Parasol or Phoenix Tree. The bamboo in the background adds the additional meaning “wishing you [the harmonies of the heaven, earth, north, south, east and west].” Note that the deer is holding a piece of fungus in its mouth. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.



Fig. 239 A phoenix soars above a spotted deer under the protective leaves of a Parasol Tree (also known as the Phoenix Tree), identifiable by its large, 3–7 lobed leaves. Detail of a Tibetan saddle blanket purchased used in Zhongdian market, Yunnan Province.



Fig. 240 Seated or kneeling deer depicted together with an eight-spoke wheel are an early symbol of Buddhism, to remind us of the Buddha's first sermon after attaining enlightenment, given in a deer park in the city of Varanasi, India. Detail from the roof of the Songzanlin Temple, Zhongdian, Yunnan.

There are also many quite old depictions of deer-like animals on textiles, ceramics, and bronzes dating back to the Song (CE 960–1279) and Jin (CE 1115–1234) Dynasties. Some of these animals have been identified as antelopes, in particular the Central Asian antelope known as a *djeiran*. We also find the

*djeiran* motif on Yuan Period (CE 1280– 1367) textiles and brocades. “The *djeiran* adopted by the Jurchens are depicted [seated] gazing at a moon or sun. The meaning of this is unclear but some scholars associate this motif with the popular phrase ‘*xīniú* (rhinoceros) gazing at the moon.’”<sup>29</sup> A scene of deer being hunted by a tiger is said to commemorate an ancient hunting ceremony. See TIGER p. [145](#).

A seated or kneeling deer, either by itself or depicted together with an eight-spoked wheel, is an aniconic symbol of early Buddhism and is to remind us of the Buddha’s first sermon, held in a deer park in the city of Varanasi (formerly Benares) in India (Fig. [240](#)). This motif appears primarily as a sculpture or decorating Buddhist monuments or texts, never as a purely decorative motif since its intent is religious and devotional. See EIGHT BUDDHIST SYMBOLS/EMBLEMS p. [238](#).

## DOG

A dog (*gǒu* 狗) is one of the twelve signs of the Chinese zodiac and is one of the oldest domesticated animals in the Chinese world (Fig. [241](#)).

According to Chinese mythology, after the first “Mother” and “Father” (Nǚwā and Fúxī) created mankind, they created the dog before all other animals, which is said to be the reason why, in written Chinese, the radical form of “dog” (*quǎn* 犬) is so common.<sup>30</sup> There are also several minority myths (which may have their origins in Chinese mythology) that involve a dog and the resultant creation, evolution, or salvation of a tribe or group of people. One such example is the story of a dog spirit (Pánhù 槃瓠), who was rewarded for his help in overcoming an enemy by being given the emperor’s daughter in marriage. The resultant offspring are said to be the ancestors of the Miao, Li, Yao, and She (southern) ethnic groups. Interestingly, the name Pánhù encompasses a character (*hù*) that contains as one of its components the symbol meaning “gourd” (*guā* 瓜), as gourds are also strongly linked to ancient creation myths, their seeds often attributed to producing the first humans. Dogs are also credited in some of these ancient legends with “helping humans obtain the first precious grain seeds.”<sup>31</sup>

Small clay statues of birds, tigers, dogs, monkeys, and dogs, known as *nínígǒu* (泥泥狗, symbolize fertility, and are amongst the most commonly found canine

depictions (Fig. 242). These are found in Huaiyang county in the province of Henan, the reputed home of the ancestor Fúxī,<sup>32</sup> and appear at the Huaiyáng Fúxī Temple Fair, which occurs on the third day of the third month of the lunar calendar, symbolizing, according to one contemporary Chinese writer, the “healthy reproduction of living creatures.”<sup>33</sup>

Dogs also appear in scenes of family settings, where their presence reinforces the idea of familial harmony and prosperity as well as procreativity. For these reasons, a dog is often depicted sitting at the feet of the Kitchen God or a robust male child holding or playing with auspicious objects on Lunar New Year prints.

There exists a particular type of dog painting shrouded in mystery. Williams describes it as a charm once used by married women born in the year of the dog to protect their future unborn children from being devoured by a supernatural Heavenly Star Dog (*tiāngǒuxīng* 天狗星), who was also believed to devour the moon during eclipses.<sup>34</sup> The picture shows a figure (Hòu Yì, the Archer, we find elsewhere in Chinese mythology) surrounded by children, shooting a dog; such pictures were to be hung in the owner’s bedroom.

The mongrel nature of dogs is not recognized in art, but is found in oral expressions, where “dog” is used as a curse word meaning “damn” (as in “damn idiot”). A bad advisor is a “dog-headed advisor” (*gǒutóu jūnshī* 狗头君师) and a hired thug a “dog’s henchman” (*gǒutuǐzi* 狗腿子).

Elegant hounds, however, are another matter, and have long been associated with high rank and status (Fig. 243). There exist several beautiful jade figures of elegant hounds dating back to the Han Dynasty, which were made right up into the Ming Dynasty. The theme appears elsewhere, too. A depiction of an elegant, tethered dog on one side of an eighteenth-century snuff bottle, where the other side depicts a hawk tied to a rock, is understood as a reference to the “noble sport of hunting and falconry, where the eagle or falcon refers to strength and nobility and the hound to fidelity.”<sup>35</sup> Chinese cigarette advertising posters of the 1930s often depicted elegant women draped in pearls, cigarette in one hand, in the other the leash of a similarly elegant hound.





Fig. 241 A contemporary papercut of a dog, one of the oldest domesticated animals, and one of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac.



Fig. 242 This colorful modern peasant painting depicts sellers of *nínigǒu*, clay statues of birds, tigers, dogs, and monkeys found in Huaiyang county in the province of Henan. Note the dog in the painting and the three magpies to signal impending good news.



Fig. 243 “Dog Watching,” China, Song Dynasty, 960–1279. Width 22.6 cm. © The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of the John Huntington Art and Polytechnic Trust 43.1915.

China’s famous Pekinese “lion dogs” (*shīzīgǒu* 狮子狗) are a different sort of dog altogether (Figs. [244](#), [245](#)). They were specially bred to resemble the lions revered in Buddhism (see LION p. [135](#)). Sometimes, these lions are mistaken for dogs in Chinese art and sculpture. The confusion between these “lion dogs,” described by Cammann as “little mops of taffy-colored silken hair,”<sup>[36](#)</sup> and real lions was capitalized on by more than one ruling house in China, particularly the Buddhist Manchu, China’s final ruling dynasty, who kept dozens of them.



Fig. 244 A contemporary papercut of two lion dogs to celebrate the launch of 2006, a Year of the Dog on the Chinese calendar. We know that this papercut is meant for use during Chinese New Year because of the inclusion of the character *chūn* for Spring (center bottom) and the auspicious Chinese New Year text and lanterns. Courtesy Chunlei Ma.



Fig. 245 Flowers and insects decorate this porcelain lion dog jar. Pekinese dogs were bred to resemble the lions revered in Buddhism, which serve as protectors of the faith.

Because some emperors, for example, the Emperor Dàoguāng (道光, r. 1821–50) and China's last great Dowager Empress Cíxǐ (慈禧, 1834–1908), were fond of Pekinese dogs, these dogs occasionally appear as a decorative motif on such items as snuff bottles during the late Qing Dynasty.<sup>[37](#)</sup>



For Tibet's snow lion, see p. [185](#).

## DONKEY

Donkeys (*lǚ* 驴) or **asses** (驢子) are primarily depicted as beasts of burden in Chinese art, reflecting the role they played in real life. Holy men and scholars were often depicted riding donkeys. One such figure was Mèng Hàorán (孟浩然), a popular Tang Dynasty poet referred to in Chapter 37 of the fourteenth-century novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sānguó Yǎnyì* 三國演義) by Luó Guànzōng (罗贯中).

One of the Eight Immortals, Zhāng Guǒlǎo (张果老), was the owner of a magical white donkey (see p. [179](#)). This donkey, however, was said to have the ability to carry its master 1,000 *li* (approximately 310 miles, 500 km) without needing to stop and rest, and then could be folded up and tucked into Zhāng Guǒlǎo's calabash or pouch for safekeeping. This is the donkey represented on Qing Dynasty amulets, lying on its back with its feet up in the air.<sup>38</sup> Because of its association with an immortal, it is a popular children's toy and folk figurine (Fig. [246](#)).



Fig. 246 Toy donkeys are popular figures as they figure in a number of Chinese folktales and legends and are associated with one of the Eight Immortals. Purchased in Yunnan, 2005.

## DRAGON

The highest-ranking animal in the Chinese animal hierarchy is the dragon (*lóng* 龙) (Figs. [247-249](#)). It is one of the four most revered animals throughout Chinese history. The modern dragon's original ancestor can be found on Neolithic pottery as well as Bronze Age ritual vessels. By the Warring States Period and Han Dynasty, however, it had taken on its distinctive slender, scaled shape and had become associated with imperial authority.

In Chinese art, dragons typically appear either facing front with splayed limbs (Fig. [253](#)), a form they take when appearing as ceremonial state symbols, such as on the front of an emperor's robe, or in profile, the more usual position when depicted on ceramic and other household and decorative objects (Figs. [254](#), [255](#)). They can also be in a confronting position (Figs. [250](#), [251](#)) or entwined (Fig. [256](#)). On textiles, dragons are referred to as “crawling dragons” (*pálóng* 爬龙), or when seen in profile running along the ground as “moving dragons” (*xínglóng* 行龙), “confronting dragons” (*duìchēnglóng* 对禾尔龙), or “intertwined dragons,” something also referred to as “flood dragons” (*jiāolóng* 蛟龙).<sup>[39](#)</sup>

Chinese tradition dictates that there are three types of dragons characterized by their habitat: sky, oceans, and marshes and mountains. These are always bearded, with whiskers, and breathe fire, fog, or rain. Chinese legend also recognizes nine types of dragons, usually described as the “dragon's sons,” which is why you will occasionally find references to nine types of dragons (see [NINE p. 227](#)). Most are easily identified by their location on the objects they are associated with, and the best place to see a good variety of them is, of course, in Beijing's Forbidden City. The nine types are as follows.<sup>[40](#)</sup>



Fig. 247 Dragons take many forms and are sometimes difficult to recognize, for example, on this minority textile from southwest China.





Fig. 248 This modern dragon lantern composed of colored plastic was made for the annual moon-watching festival, celebrated during the eighth lunar month.



Fig. 249 A five-clawed *lóng* dragon facing front with splayed limbs – one of their most formidable and formal poses. Detail from a large porcelain platter (see Fig. [514](#)).



Fig. 250 Two archaic dragons confront one another on this decorative piece of wood long ago removed from a house or temple.



Fig. 251 Confronting dragons. Detail from a protective fence in Beijing's Forbidden City, home to the twenty-four Chinese emperors who ruled between 1420 and 1911.



Fig. 252 A nephrite sculpture of a *bixie* from the Eastern Han/ Jin/Early Six Dynasties Period. 6 x 9.5 cm. Although described as having a tortoise-like body with a dragon head, this mythological figure is also sometimes described as having a lion's body. It is easy to see why. Courtesy of Weisbrod Chinese Art Ltd, New York.



Fig. 253 A front-facing dragon from the famous Nine Dragon Wall in Beijing's Forbidden City. There is another Nine Dragon Wall in Beihai Park.



Fig. 254 A dragon in profile from the famous Nine Dragon Wall in Beijing's Forbidden City. Note it is cavorting in rolling waves with its eye on the flaming pearl above its head.



Fig. 255 Chinese roofing tiles are usually decorated with symbols or animals. Look carefully and you will see these tiny undulating dragons with their long spear-ended tails above their heads. Diao Yu Tai State Guesthouse, a former imperial palace in Beijing.





Fig. 256 Two entwined snake-like dragons with magnificent horns. Detail from a Kunming village gable.

The first, usually referred to as the “eldest son,” is known as Bìxì (屈) or Bàxià (霸下), described as the dragon who “likes to bear a heavy burden” (Fig. [252](#)). He is also known as the Stone-Tortoise Dragon (*shíguīlóng* 石龟龙) because he has a tortoise-like body and a dragon-like head, and is usually found supporting a pillar or column. There are many famous Bìxì statues at major tourist sites in China: guarding one of the Ming tombs at Changling; at the Eastern Qing tombs, 80 miles (125 km) northwest of Beijing; in front of the Daxiong Hall in the famous Shaolin Temple; and at the Chenghua stele in the Temple of Confucius.

The second is Chīwěn (螭吻), who was said to like to swallow things (the character *wěn* means “lips” or an “animal’s mouth” (Figs. [260](#), [261](#)). This is the fish-like, hornless dragon with a very truncated body and a large, wide mouth usually found along roof ridges (as if swallowing the roof beams). His presence on roofs is also said to guard against fires. “A paragraph in the Tang dynasty book *Sū Shì Yǎn Yì* (苏氏演义) by Sū È (苏鹗) says that a mythical sea creature called the *chi wen* [sic] was put on the roofs of buildings during the Han dynasty to protect the structures from fire hazards.”<sup>[41](#)</sup>

This dragon is still found on the roofs of traditional Chinese homes today, protecting the inhabitants from fires. Nor do you need to travel to China to see some: London’s Victoria & Albert Museum has some lovely late Ming (1500–1650?) yellow-glazed stoneware examples. This dragon in appearance, at least, seems strongly related to the winged dragon with fish tail known as the *fēiyú* (飞鱼).

The third dragon son is called Púláo (蒲牢), the dragon who “likes to roar” (Fig. [257](#)). This is the name given the dragon that appears on bell handles, usually with two heads where it is affixed to the bell, its curved body forming the handle.



The dragon depicted above courts of law and prison doors is the fourth dragon son called Bì'àn (漚肝), which has come to be synonymous with “lock-up.” He is easily identifiable as his face most resembles that of a tiger, usually with two large bared fangs, facing front. He is without a body and is said to be keen on lawsuits.

The face adorning ancient bronze vessels has been designated the fifth dragon son, Tāotiè (饕餮) (Fig. [258](#)). Only his face appears, identifiable by its large bulging eyes and stylized swirls that form the rest of the “face.” Because of his appearance on pots, he is said to be of a greedy nature and fond of good food.

The sixth dragon son, named Gōngfù (虫公蠹), is fond of water and is the dragon found decorating bridge piers or extending out over drains (Fig. [262](#)).

The seventh dragon son is known as Yázi (睚眦) (Fig. [259](#)). His forté is fighting, so he is the dragon head you find on sword or axe handles.

The eighth dragon son is the lion-like figure depicted on top of incense burner covers, Suānní (後貌) or Jīnní (金貌). He is said to like to sit still.

The ninth dragon son is Jiāotú (椒图), who is found decorating door knockers and door guards, as he prefers to keep hidden away in his den (Figs. [263-266](#)).

The traditional Chinese dragon is identified by nine attributes taken from nine different animals: the head of a camel, horns of a deer, eyes of a rabbit, ears of a cow, neck of a snake,<sup>[42](#)</sup> belly of a frog, scales of a carp, claws of a hawk, and palm of a tiger.<sup>[43](#)</sup>

Regardless of individual features, however, dragons are meant to be awe-inspiring as they represent the collective forces of nature – “bloody eyes, impetuously moving red beard, mist-hoarding scales, bristling mane, hair on the knees, claws, and teeth. Make him spit and hide in the rain and dew, make him skip and gambol as he soars through space.”<sup>[44](#)</sup>



Fig. 257 The third dragon son is known as Púláo, the dragon who “likes to roar,” which usually appears on bell handles or with two heads when affixed to a bell. Drawing courtesy of Sonja Bjaaland.



Fig. 258 Taotie (ogre mask). Shang Dynasty, ca. 1766–1045 BCE. Marble. 8.6 x 13.5 cm. © The Cleveland Museum of Art, Anonymous Gift, 1952.585.



Fig. 259 The seventh dragon decorates the head of halberds, and is known as Yázi.



Fig. 260 **Chiwēn**, the dragon who likes “to swallow things,” one of the nine traditional types of dragons. His presence is believed to protect dwellings from fires. A roof detail from Yunnan.



Fig. 261 Although **Chiwēn** is described as having a fish-like, hornless, truncated body and a large, wide mouth, this example clearly has horns. Photographed in the Temple of the Soul’s Retreat (Lingyinshi), Hangzhou.



**Fig. 262 The sixth dragon son, Gōngfū, is the dragon head found decorating bridge piers or extending out over drains.**



**Fig. 263 The ninth dragon son is known as Jiāotú and is the dragon head found on door knockers.**



**Fig. 264 There are many variations of the ninth dragon's face but all go by the same name.**



**Fig. 265 Another variant of Jiāotú, this one photographed in the Forbidden City, Beijing. Courtesy of Elfi Chandra.**



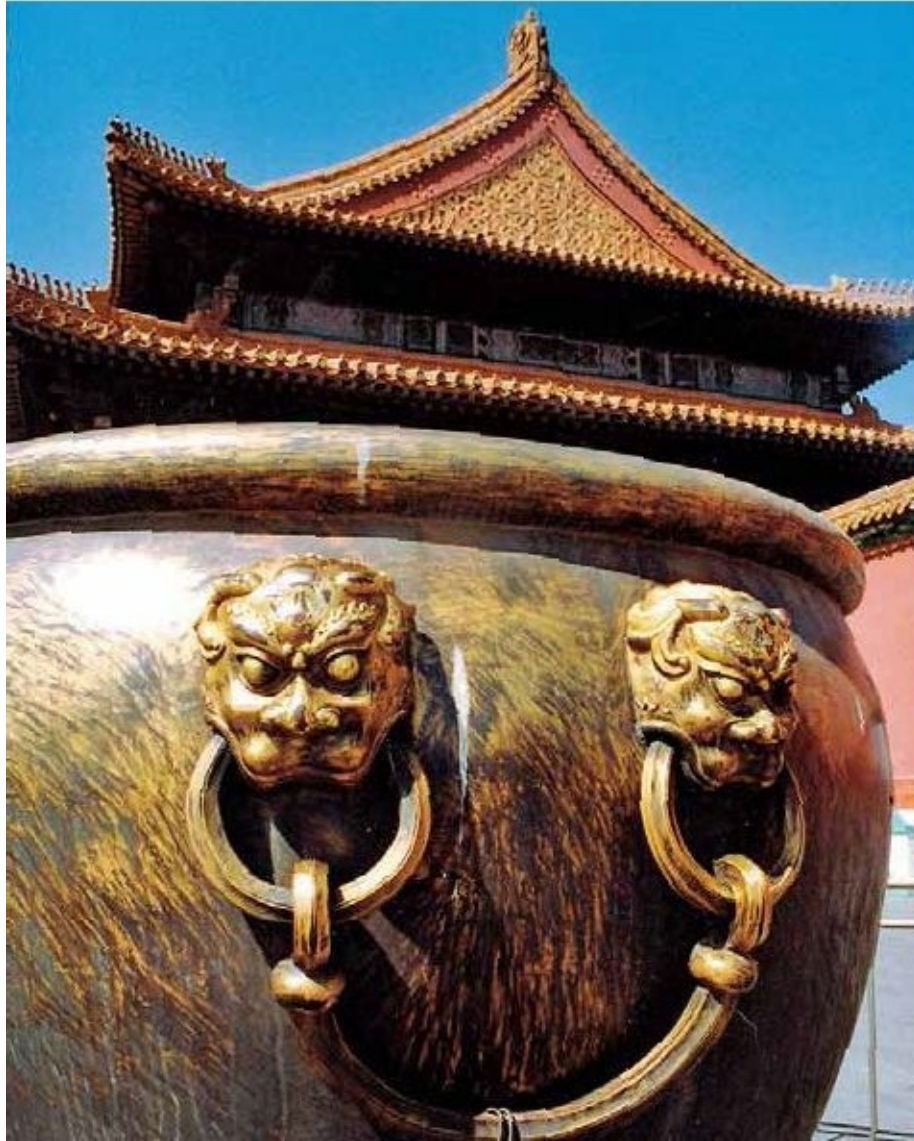


Fig. 266 Jiāotú's face also appears on other items with handles, such as this large bronze vat found in the Forbidden City, once used to hold water to put out fires. In the winter, they were lined with padded cotton and covered, with fires lit beneath them, to keep the water from freezing. These vats were once covered in gold, which foreign soldiers scraped off with their bayonets when they occupied the city. You can still see the resultant scratches. Courtesy of Angela Soeteber.

Dragons do, however, have a benevolent side, as they were also believed to symbolize the benefits of protection that ultimate power wields. They were thus the symbol of the imperial family and used in conjunction with elements of imperial life. For example, the emperor's throne was referred to as the "dragon throne," and dragon motifs decorated the emperor's crockery and household textiles.



Most students of Chinese textiles speak in terms of three main types of dragons, based on the three most common forms appearing on court dress from the Ming Dynasty onward: the *lóng* (龙), *mǎng* (蟒), and *dǒuniú* (斗牛) (Fig. [269](#)).

The use and appearance of dragons on court robes is a lengthy and complex subject, but from the Qing Dynasty – the period from which most court textiles featured in museums originate – as a general rule, officials of ranks one to three were allowed the use of the five-clawed *lóng* (龙) dragon, while the lower ranks (four down) were only allowed use of the four-clawed *mǎng* (蟒) dragon (Fig. [267](#)). These dragons are virtually identical in terms of majesty and composition, the main difference being the number of claws. There were also “lesser dragons,” such as the *dǒuniú* (斗牛), a dragon with three or four claws and backward-curling ram-like horns (Figs. [268](#), [274](#)), and the *fēiyú* (飞鱼), a four-clawed winged dragon with a fish’s tail that translates literally as “flying fish” (Fig. [273](#)), introduced during the reign of the debauched Ming Emperor Zhèngdé (正德, r. 1506–21).<sup>[45](#)</sup>

While we know that up to the Yuan Dynasty garments decorated with dragons were worn openly by anyone with enough confidence and money to own them, thereafter the dragon motif was reserved for the emperor and his immediate family. And while military and civil officials of the Ming and Qing courts wore square rank badges embellished with images of animals and birds, only members of the emperor’s family were allowed to wear the round badges bearing dragons.



Fig. 267 Detail from an imperial dragon robe known as a *lóngpao* with nine dragons and the Twelve Imperial Symbols. Reign of the Emperor Qiánlóng, 1760–95. Courtesy of the Chris Hall Collection Trust (on loan to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore).



Fig. 268 A “lesser” dragon known as a *dǒuniú* is easily recognized as it is the only dragon whose horns curl backwards like a ram’s.



Fig. 269 Dragons are often divided into three types. This modern papercut depicts the dragon known as the *lóng* as it has five claws as opposed to the four-clawed *mǎng* or the four-clawed winged dragon with a fish’s tail known as the *fēiyú*.

Dragons from the Tang Dynasty onward are commonly depicted chasing or holding a flaming disk or “jewel,” which is believed by some scholars to represent the sun (both the dragon and the sun being the ultimate in *yáng* symbolization) (Figs. [270-272](#)).<sup>46</sup> The more likely explanation, however, to my mind is that offered by Robert D. Mowry: “The pairing of dragon and jewel seems to represent a combination of elements from two separate traditions, the dragon from Chinese mythology and the jewel from Buddhist iconography. The jewel, often termed a pearl in English, derives from the Buddhist *rúyì bǎozhū*, or ‘wish-granting jewel’ (如意宝珠, Sanskrit, *cintamani*) that is held by a number of Buddhist deities ... [and] is not a pearl in the strict sense of the term, but a

talismanic jewel that symbolises transcendent wisdom.”<sup>47</sup> (See PRECIOUS JEWEL p.



[242.](#))

Fig. 270 A phoenix and a dragon chase an illuminated pearl on this blue-and-white stem cup. The “flames” surrounding the jewel or pearl are a common artistic device symbolizing magical powers.



Fig. 271 This detail from a door in Beijing’s Forbidden City shows a five-clawed *lóng dragon* chasing a flaming jewel. *Rúyì* clouds and scepters fill in the empty spaces.



Fig. 272 A dragon chases a flaming disk or “jewel” on this orange silk flag photographed in Beijing’s Forbidden City.

The jewel is often shown surrounded by flames, which undoubtedly fueled the belief that it originally represented the sun. Flames are a common artistic



device in Buddhist art to symbolize magical powers. “The motif of dragon-and-jewel thus associates the dragon with knowledge and supernatural powers; as an emblem on official robes, it associates those attributes with office holders.”<sup>48</sup> If we view the dragon as a symbol of the emperor, we should view the jewel or pearl as wisdom, which is compatible with the Buddhist symbolism of the flaming orb as Enlightenment. The motif of dragon-and-jewel grew in popularity from the Tang (618-907) to the Five Dynasties Period (907-60), when it began appearing on textiles and other decorative arts, and continued on into the Song (960-1279) and the (Mongolian) Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368), when it enjoyed an unusual popularity, as can be seen on examining Yuan scrolls or paintings of the Yuan aristocracy.<sup>49</sup>

From the Song Dynasty, dragons were usually paired with clouds or waves to underscore their water-giving (and in China, this meant life-sustaining) powers. But it is during the Ming and Qing dynasties that one finds the dramatic and immediately recognizable motif of a dragon amidst clouds appearing over a triangular mountain peak that itself rises from a stylized sea of waves representing longevity and abundance. This motif figured not only on the hem section of court robes,<sup>50</sup> but also on pillows, screens, wall decorations, pillar rugs, and other hangings, as well as architectural ornaments. Thus were the heavens, earth, and sea united in the majesty of this popular stylized design.

A dragon pictured with a phoenix forms part of the conjugal pairing popularly used as a wedding motif even today (see Fig. 270). In this pairing, the dragon represents *yáng* forces and the phoenix *yīn* the ultimate representation being the emperor and his empress. A poet of the Ming Dynasty once wrote of the two famous mountain ranges (Tàishān 太室 and Shàoshì 少室) that comprise the famous Sōngshān (嵩山) central mountains: “Tàishì is like a dragon sleeping, Shàoshì resembles a phoenix dancing.”<sup>51</sup>

If the object you are examining depicts a sea nymph being borne through the heavens in a chariot drawn by six dragons, it is the Goddess of the Luò River, Luò Shén (洛神), the unsurpassable beauty of Chinese legends (see p. 208). And if a dragon is depicted in combat with a person bearing a spear, who appears to be a young man whose feet are depicted as flaming wheels, this is Nézha (哪吒), a mythical hero from the time of the Jade Emperor, who is credited with killing one of the Dragon King’s nine sons in order to protect mankind from drowning in a flood (see p. 154).<sup>52</sup>



For the meaning of dragons paired with bats, especially popular during the Qiánlóng Period see bat, p. [112](#).

To the author's knowledge, the expression "mounting the dragon," which was a Chinese euphemism for sexual intercourse, is not utilized in Chinese art, although erotica is a popular subject.<sup>[53](#)</sup>



Fig. 273 A mythical Chinese winged dragon with a fish tail, known as a fēiyú executed in plaster relief finished with decorative painting an art form known as *huīsù* (灰塑). Detail from the House of Tan Yeok Nee, Singapore. Courtesy of Winpeak Investment and Wingem Investment Pte Ltd.



Fig. 274 Front and back of a robe featuring the mythical *dǒuniú* dragon, most likely a gift of a Ming emperor and re sewn to be worn by a monk. Ca. 1450. Courtesy of the Chris Hall Collection Trust (oil loan to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore).



Fig. 275 One of a pair of Tang Dynasty *sancai* tomb guardians. These earth spirits or “beasts that guard the tomb” were placed within tombs to guard one’s ancestors from roving evil spirits. Height 76 cm. © Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

## EARTH SPIRIT

Another mythical animal that you will encounter in Chinese art is known as *zhèn mù shòu* (镇墓兽), usually translated as earth spirit or **tomb guardian** (Fig. 275).<sup>54</sup> These fierce hybrid beings were found in pairs at the entrances to tombs, their primary responsibility being to guard the tomb's inhabitant from escaping to do harm in the world and evil spirits from entering the tomb. While their bodies are a combination of dogs, lions, boars, and other fierce animals, one face will be human and the other that of a beast. During the period of the Northern Wei (CE 386–534), the faces were more canine-like, evolving into lion faces during the Tang. Most extant examples are in the Tang's famous *sāncǎi* (三彩 three-color) glaze consisting of a clear glaze, an orange to brownish glaze made using iron oxide, and a bright green glaze prepared using copper oxide. Sometimes cobalt oxide was used to produce a bright blue. This glaze was used extensively on the Tang's mass-produced grave goods.

## ELEPHANT

Once indigenous in China, domesticated during the Han Dynasty, and kept by the imperial court for ceremonies (and possibly for warfare, as in ancient Siam and Burma and India), elephants (*xiàng* 象) once used to roam freely in northeast China (Fig. 276).<sup>55</sup> Because they also feature prominently in both Buddhist and Hindu mythology, iconography, folklore, and scripture, it is natural to find them playing similar roles in Chinese thought and art, where they symbolize prudence, wisdom, and strength. For example, the Buddhist bodhisattva Samantabhadra (known as the Bodhisattva of Universal Virtue and in Chinese as Pǔxián 普贤) is usually depicted seated on a white elephant (see p. 189).

Depictions of elephants are found on Shang and Zhou bronzes,<sup>56</sup> and Tang Dynasty burial pottery but “the last elephants crossed the Yangtse to the south about 1100 A.D.”<sup>57</sup> victims of the spread of agriculture and deforestation.

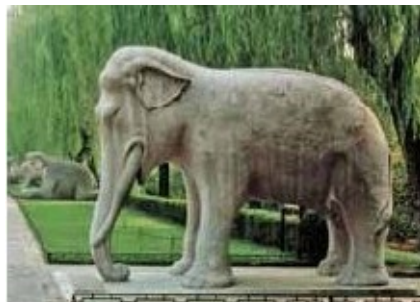




Fig. 276 Two of the four elephants along the walkway to the Ming Tombs on the outskirts of Beijing. The presence of camels and elephants as beasts of burden confirmed the breadth and size of the Chinese empire and the power of its emperors. Courtesy of Angela Soeteber.

The Chinese elephants most readers will be familiar with are the life-size figures carved in stone leading the way to the tombs of the Ming and Qing emperors in the outskirts of Beijing – a path known as the Sacred Way. It was during the Ming Dynasty that elephants began to be a part of important imperial celebrations.<sup>58</sup> As a result, smaller, decorative jade elephants were popular during the Ming and Qing and can be seen in many private and public collections.

A depiction of a larger and smaller elephant, “father and son elephants” (*fǔ zǐ bǎi xiàng* 父子摆象), such as that found on the south portal of the east face of the Anshang archway in Shandong, is a visual pun that can be decoded as *fǔ zǐ bài xiàng* (父子拜相), where *fǔ* (父) was a respectful term for an elderly man and *zǐ* (子), “son.” *Bǎi* (摆), meaning “to arrange, place, put” is a cipher for another *bài* (拜) – “to acknowledge as one’s master, do obeisance,” while “elephant” (*xiàng* 象) is a cipher for the *xiàng* (相) that means “prime minister.” Once translated, this motif of two elephants expresses a state wherein “both father and son (e.g. the family’s patrilineal line) receive investiture as Prime Minister.”<sup>59</sup>

A child (*zǐ* 子) depicted riding on an elephant’s back (*qíxiàng* 骑象) is a cipher for “happy or auspicious” (*jíxiáng* 吉祥). This cipher is based on the word that means to “carry on the back” (*bèi* 背), which sounds like the *bèi* in *bèizi* (辈子), “all one’s life.” Correctly interpreted, this picture conveys the wish for an auspicious life. Very often, the child will be holding a *rúyì* (如意) scepter, to make clear that the picture should be interpreted as a felicitous greeting (“May your life be auspicious in ways of your choice”).

Another homophone for elephant has the meaning of “fragrant, perfume” (*xiāng* 香, the same *xiāng* that is found in the place name Xiānggǎng that gives Hong Kong its meaning of Fragrant Harbor). When mischievously combined with any one of a number of Chinese morphemes, for example *yòu*, which can mean “also” (*yòu* 又), “and” (*yòu* 又), “glaze” (*yòu* 釉), and “young” (*yòu* 幼), any one of the resultant combinations of *yòuxiāng*, let us say, for example, “glazed elephant” or “young elephant,” can also be interpreted as *yōuxiāng* (幽香), “a delicate fragrance,” so elephants may be found decorating snuff bottles and even



serve as inspiration for the shape of the snuff bottle itself.

Look carefully and you will see that some elephants are carrying vases on their backs. This motif of an elephant with a jar or vase on its back, or a “vase with elephant” – symbolizes “peace and serenity” because a vase (*píng* 井瓦) is a homophone for “peace” (*píng* 平) (Figs. [277](#), [278](#)). Identify the contents of the vase to determine the full meaning of the picture. For example, the lacquer throne of the Qiánlóng Emperor had many auspicious pictures carved on it, including an elephant bearing a vase of jewels, a rebus that could mean “peace reigning in the north” if we believe that the word that means to “carry on the back” (*bèi* 背) was meant to be a pun for “north” (*běi* 北).[60](#)

If the vase is holding the evergreen known as the Sacred or Japanese lily, then the meaning “10,000 years of peace” is derived from the plant’s Chinese name *wànniánqīng* (万年青), as *wànnián* (万年) means “10,000 years.” If the vase contains four different seasonal flowers, the meaning is expanded to “throughout the year.” If the vase contains the five types of farm crops, it means “crops are abundant.”[61](#)



Fig. 277 Because the name for “elephant” in Chinese (*xiàng*) sounds like “fragrance” or “perfume” (*xiāng*), elephant-shaped snuff bottles were especially popular (“auspicious fragrance”). Nearly all have vases on their back to add the sentiment of “peace.” Drawing courtesy of Sonja Bjaaland.



Fig. 278 An elephant with a jar or vase on its back symbolizes “peace and serenity” because a vase is a homophone for “peace” and elephant (*xiàng*) has a homophone that means “auspicious” (*xiáng*). Statue in the arts and crafts store of the City God Temple, Shanghai.

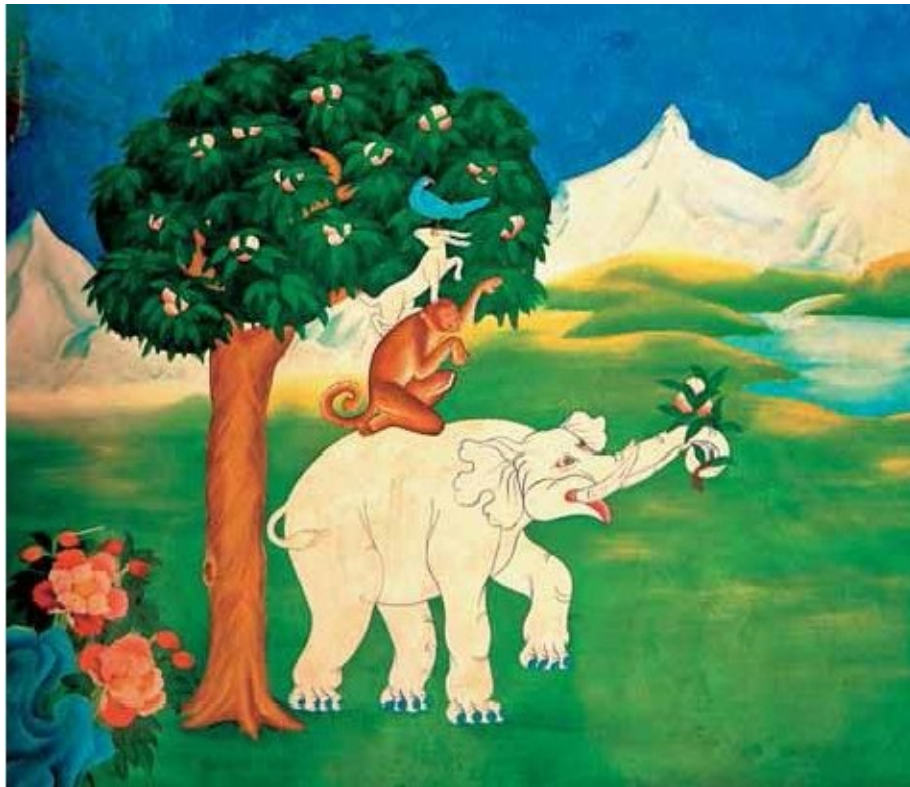


Fig. 279 A popular Tivedan motif depicting a partridge astride a white hare, sitting on a monkey on the back of an elephant that is standing under a banyan tree has several interpretations. One of the most popular is a parable teaching children the value of working together to reach the fruit in the tree. Mural from the 4,000-year-old Dabao Temple, Zhongdian, Yunnan.



Fig. 280 Another depiction of Four Friends, this from the Songzanlin Si, Zhongdian, Yunnan. Another interpretation of this grouping, which is often called the Four Harmonious Brothers, is that the elephant represents our body, the monkey our restless mind, the hare our emotions, and the bird our soul. All four can live harmoniously together under the tree of spirituality.

If a swastika is pictured somewhere with the elephant, perhaps as part of the pattern on a cloth draping the elephant, or in the background, then the elephant (*xiàng* 象) and swastika (*wàn* 万) represent the Chinese expression “everything,” as in “every phenomenon on earth” (*wànxiàng* 万象) and need to be understood together with the other symbols in the picture. Most typically, these will be symbols of happiness or prosperity.

There is also a popular Tibetan motif known as the Four Friends, usually found as a fresco on temple walls in those regions of southwest China influenced by Tibetan Buddhism, such as Yunnan. It depicts a partridge astride a white hare, itself astride a monkey that sits on the back of an elephant that stands beneath a banyan tree (Figs. [279](#), [280](#)). The purpose of the picture is to signal that age confers seniority in the monastic community, but some scholars believe that these four animals represent “the four terrestrial habitats of sky (partridge), tree (monkey), ground (elephant), and underground (hare).”<sup>62</sup> Children are sometimes taught that this picture shows the combined strength of friendship, as by working together the animals reach the fruit on the tree.

## FOX

Foxes (*hú* 狐) abound in popular Chinese fiction because of their reputed ability to assume human shapes at will. This transformation usually takes the form of a beautiful young woman (less often a young man) to entice innocents astray. Williams credits them with being “regarded by the Chinese as an emblem of longevity and craftiness.”<sup>63</sup> Paintings that show scenes with foxes are usually taken from classical novels.

## GOAT

The goat or **sheep** (*yáng* 羊) is one of the twelve animals of the Chinese lunar calendar, following the year of the snake (Fig. [281](#)). Its homophone (*yáng* 阳) is very auspicious, referring to the masculine or positive principle in nature (*yīn/yáng*). The same character also means “sun,” so the goat came to represent both the male principle and the sun. The Chinese use the term *yáng* to mean both goats and sheep, but can differentiate between them by using the more precise expressions *shānyáng* (“mountain goat” 山羊) and *miányáng* (“woolly sheep” 绵羊) or, as the author recently heard in Yunnan, *máoyáng* (“hairy sheep” 毛羊), to distinguish the straight-haired billy or nanny goat from the curly-haired ram or ewe (sheep)<sup>64</sup> (Fig. [282](#)). (See SHEEP p. [144](#).) The goat of the lunar cycle is always a goat, never a ram or a ewe.

The ram was an important animal in ancient China, especially to the nomads to whom it provided both food and wool (Fig. [286](#)). Bronze vessels in the shape



of rams or more typically ram heads, appear frequently in the late Shang (1523–1028 BCE) and rams were one of the forms carved in precious jade dating back to the Liang Dynasty (502–56 BCE).

Rams are one of the “earliest instances of pictorial pun [as they] can be traced back to the Han Dynasty when the concept of ‘auspiciousness’ or ‘fortunate omen’ (*xiáng* 祥) was commonly represented by the image of [a] ram ... because they were considered homophonic at that time.”<sup>65</sup> The character *xiáng* is composed of (on the left) a character that means “spirit” and (on the right) a character that literally means “ram.” One manifestation was the use of ram heads on roofing tiles to render the dwelling lucky. A stylized ram’s head is also one of the oldest textile patterns we have from the Silk Road. Today, reduced to a simple geometric design, it goes almost unnoticed to the unknowing eye.

Sometimes mistaken for rams, the mythical stone figures known as *xièzhì* (獬豸) along the spirit roads that lead to imperial tombs, represent incorruptibility and honest civil officials (see Fig. [350](#)).

A picture of three goats (*sānyáng* 三羊) is a popular New Year motif forming the pastoral scene of *sānyáng qītài* (三羊启泰), “three goats welcoming spring,” that is a homophonic pun of the expression *sānyáng kāitài* (三阳开泰), “the New Year ushers in renewal and change” or “happiness and prosperity in the New Year”<sup>66</sup> (Fig. [284](#)). This picture and expression is especially popular when the lunar calendar coincides with the Year of the Goat. The expression *sānyáng* (三阳) extrapolated from the picture of three rams, is a reference to the first three [lunar calendar *yáng*] months of the year. *Tài* (泰) is number eleven of the sixty-four hexagrams of the *I Ching*, and is composed of the basic trigram representing Heaven (three unbroken lines or, literally, three [*sān*] *yáng*), topped by the basic trigram representing earth (three broken lines). This is the most favorable of the sixty-four hexagrams in terms of divining the future. The overall interpretation of this hexagram is “Peace. The mean decline; the great and good approach – good fortune and success!”<sup>67</sup> The most popular interpretation, however, is the simpler “three goats welcoming spring.” Three goats was an especially common motif on snuff bottles in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and can also be found adorning ceramic platters and plates and textiles.<sup>68</sup>

Goats and sheep are also generally linked with filial piety, peace, and prosperity, three obvious “positives” (*yáng* 阳) in Chinese society. Kneeling sheep, in particular, “were considered as symbols of filial children by Confucians.

Hence kneeling sheep-shaped sculptures are popular in front of mausoleums”<sup>69</sup> (Figs. [285](#), [286](#)).



Fig. 281 A contemporary papercut of a ram, one of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac.



Fig. 282 *Sheep and Goat* by Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322). China, Yuan Dynasty, early fourteenth century. Handscroll, ink on paper, 25.2 x 48.4 cm. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Purchase, F1931.4.



Fig. 283 A small wooden belt toggle (in Japan known as a *netsuke*) of a ram, strongly associated with the

“male” or *yáng* principle.



Fig. 284 Three rams rest under a pine tree in a pictorial representation of the expression *sānyáng qītài* (“three goats welcome spring” or “the New Year ushers in renewal and change”). The four-character phrase is engraved, right to left, at the top of this architectural feature found in a Yunnan courtyard.



Fig. 285 A Han Dynasty stone ram in the tomb environs of one of the Emperor Wǔdì's (武帝, r. BCE 141-87) favorites, Hud Qùbìng (霍去病). Photographed while visiting the Mào líng (茂陵) Museum, west of Xi'an, summer 2006.



Fig. 286 Another stone ram at the same site.

Be careful, however. If a human figure appears with the goats (even a group of three goats), the representation is certain to be Sū Wǔ (苏武), the first-century BCE Han Dynasty military official who was sent as an emissary to the Huns who kept him as a hostage for nineteen years herding sheep before he was finally allowed to return home.<sup>70</sup>

Five goats is the symbol of the city of Guangzhou in southern China. According to legend, five Immortals riding five goats entered the city, each of them planting rice to assure the city of prosperity. As a result, Guangzhou is sometimes referred to as Yángchéng (羊城) or Goat City.

“Mutton fat” jade carvings of goats are considered particularly attractive as the stone’s natural tones closely resembles the animals’ natural color.

## HARE

See RABBIT p. [142](#).

## HORSE

The horse (*mǎ* 马), one of the first domesticated animals, figures prominently throughout Chinese history and has a rich symbolic heritage (Fig. [288](#)). Certainly to the nomadic peoples of China, its importance for both riding and as a pack animal would have made it a valuable animal (camels had a similar importance, especially along the Silk Road). The most valued horses were those that came from Central Asia’s Ferghana Valley in the Tiānshān (天山) Mountains to the west and north of the famous Taklamakan Desert. The vast numbers of ceramic tomb figures, jade carvings, and scrolls featuring these beautiful and powerful horses attest to their importance throughout early Chinese history, symbolizing



both status and military power.

The horse also figured prominently in early Chinese texts, where it was portrayed as the perfect foil to the dragon. “Contrasting with the dragon and keeping him under control is the mare.... The horse, then, is at the same time both useful and natural... [so you have] the docile mare act[ing] as counterpole to the roaming dragon.”<sup>71</sup> Whereas one would have expected the dragon to represent the strongest trigram of the *Yìjīng* (易经, *Book of Changes*), it is rather the horse (see YĪN AND YĀNG p. 239) that claims this position.

The horse was particularly popular as an artistic subject during the Tang Dynasty, perhaps because this was the period when the Silk Road was at the height of its importance and trade had become a significant economic stimulant (Figs. 287, 289). Statuary horses from this period are easily identifiable by the smallness of their heads in relation to their body size, and the popular use of the *sāncǎi* (three-color) glaze in decorating the ceramic models used as mortuary wares. Historians tell of the Emperor Tàizōng’s (太宗, r. 627-50) great love of horses, to the extent that he had stone panels of his favorites made for the walls of his tomb<sup>72</sup> (Fig. 290). The popularity of horses as a theme continued into the Song, as exemplified by the work of the famous Northern Song artist Lǐ Gōnglín (李公麟, 1049-1106), who is credited with introducing the concept of self-expression to Chinese art, as opposed to being purely decorative or to convey moral messages. Horses continue to be a popular theme of modern Chinese artists.



Fig. 287 The horse was a popular artistic subject during the Tang Dynasty (618-906). Horses from this period are easily identified by the disproportionately small size of their heads compared with their ample and strong bodies. Glazed figures of Tang Dynasty horses are to be found in virtually every Chinese museum collection. Replica of a Tang-period scroll depicting a horseman and his horse. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.



Fig. 288 Restored *qianci* horses from The House of Tan Yeok Nee, now housing the University of Chicago in Singapore. *Qianci* is a decorative technique found in southern China's coastal towns that uses colorful porcelain pieces to create mosaic patterns. Courtesy of Winpeak Investment and Wingem Investment Pte Ltd.



Fig. 289 A beautiful detail from the famous “Polo” fresco in the Tang Dynasty tomb of Prince Zhang Huái (章怀), the second son of the Empress Wǔ Zétiān.



Fig. 290 One of five pairs of stone horses along the 1.8 mile (3 km) “spirit trail” leading to the tomb of the Emperor Tàizōng and the Empress Wǔ Zétiān, located about 47 miles (75 km) northwest of Xian. In the background you can see the pair of watchtowers known as the “Nipple Hills” Hie emperor was extremely fond of his horses and had stone panels of his favorites made for his tomb.



Fig. 291 According to Chinese legend, a “scroll-carrying horse” and “book-bearing tortoise” are credited with bringing the origins of Chinese culture to the Great Ancestor. Drawing courtesy of Sonja Bjaaland.

One of the most common depictions in popular Chinese art is that of a magical horse usually portrayed in a gallop, head turned towards its back on which are tied several scrolls known as the legendary *Yellow River Diagrams or Maps* (*Jiānghé Tú* 江河图) (Fig. 291). The *Book of the Luo River* (*Luòhéshū* 洛河书) is said to have been borne to mankind on the back of a tortoise. Together, the “scroll-carrying horse” and the “book-bearing tortoise” are credited with bringing the origins of Chinese culture to the Great Ancestor Fúxī (伏羲). This may be the origin of the horse found in Chinese folk art, especially around Chinese New Year’ known as the Heavenly Horse (*tiānmǎ* 天马),<sup>73</sup> also known as the Precious Horse, that bears valuables (usually in the form of good luck charms and gold ingots) - but the important point is that horses are seen as bearers of good things. A popular sculpture or picture of a woman warrior standing or seated on a war steed will be the beautiful, filial daughter Huā Mùlán, who joined the army disguised as a man in order to replace her elderly father and young brother who were being drafted against their will into the military (see p. 207).

Another familiar theme in Chinese art is the Eight Horses of Mù Wáng, renowned for having carried the fifth ruler of the Zhou Dynasty (King Mu 穆王, 1023-957 BCE) through his empire in a chariot (Figs. 292, 293, 295). The horses were said to be as swift as dragons and their individual names reflected their talents. “One horse was called Beyond Earth, whose hooves did not touch the ground. The second was called Windswept Plumes, which went faster than any winged bird. The third was called Rush-by-Night, which covered ten thousand leagues in the night. The fourth was called Faster-than-Shadow, which could keep up with the journeying sun. The fifth was called Finer-than-Flashing-Light,



whose coat was the sheen of dazzling light. The sixth was called Faster-than-Light, whose single bound cast ten shadows. The seventh was called Rising Mist, which rushed along on the crest of the clouds. The eighth was called Wing Bearer, whose body had fleshy plumes.”<sup>74</sup> This theme has come to symbolize perseverance and success, and images of horses are commonly found in Asian office lobbies and in the offices of CEOs. Galloping horses gained popularity in Chinese art under the Ming Emperor Chénghuà (1465–87), who is primarily known in Chinese art for reviving the use of reign marks.<sup>75</sup>



Fig. 292 Four horses appear on each side of this snuff bottle depicting the Eight Horses of Ma Wang, the fifth ruler of the Zhou Dynasty. Courtesy of Eileen Deeley.



Fig. 293 When rendered in a more sophisticated medium, the Eight Horses of King Mu is a popular office motif, reminding CEOs and employees alike that the king was only able to attain the powerful position he did as a result of the loyalty and collective talents of his eight steeds.



Fig. 294 Contemporary papercut of a horse, one of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac.

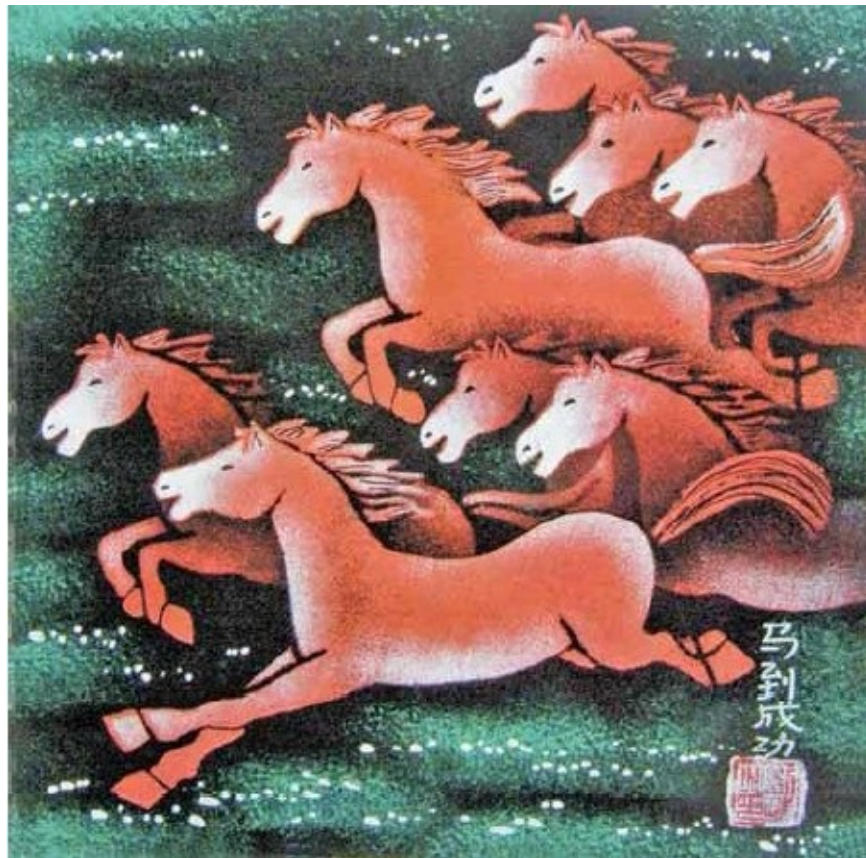


Fig. 295 The Eight Horses of King Mu are depicted in this contemporary peasant painting.

A painting or statue of a prince on horseback, the horse's hooves held in the air by heavenly beings so as not to give away his departure, is a depiction of Lord Siddhartha, destined to become the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni, as he leaves

his family's palace.

Because horses represented nobility and wealth, they were also associated with academic pursuits. Being a candidate in the civil examinations was referred to as “horse riding,” as the small cells where the examinations took place were likened to “horse stalls.” There are also literary illusions to talent being like a heavenly horse flying in the sky, but until it could fly it was kept tethered awaiting appraisal by a horse expert. As a result, a picture of a tethered horse is sometimes used to represent a young official, still not “discovered” but full of future promise.<sup>76</sup>

The Chinese expression for “on the horse” (*mǎshàng* 马上) also means “right away” (*mǎshàng* 马上), making a picture of a young candidate on horseback express the wish for “immediate” academic success.

The horse is also, let us remember, one of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac (see p. [109](#)) (Fig. [294](#)).

## JIǎODUĀN

In the vast Chinese world of mythical beasts, there exists an animal with the appearance of a deer but with a variety of horns and a horse-like tail. This was known as a *jiǎoduān* (角端), credited with being able to travel long distances and understand all the languages and nuances of the most remote realms in the world. *Jiǎoduān* are found primarily as decorative motifs on seal handles.<sup>77</sup>

## KIRTIMUKHA

See tāotiè p. [144](#).



Fig. 296 One of a pair of nineteenth-century (ca. 1850–75) third-rank military badges depicting leopards. Note the auspicious rocks, flowers, swastika, and bats plus the Eight Immortals' special symbols, for example, Hàn Zhōnglǐ's fan. Courtesy of the Chris Hall Collection Trust (on loan to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore).



Fig. 297 Close-up of a bronze lion statue, photographed in the Forbidden City, Beijing. Courtesy of Eden Politte.





Fig. 298 This famous seventeen-arch bridge can be seen in Beijing's Summer Palace. The balustrades are topped by 120 marble lions, no two alike. Courtesy of Angela Soeteber.



Fig. 299 Detail of a lion with raised paw from a mid-sixth to early seventh century garment. Courtesy of the Chris Hall Collection Trust (on loan to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore).

## LEOPARD

Known for its ferocity and bravery, the leopard (*bào* 豹) motif (together with the tiger) was used as the rank designation on badges worn by third- and fourth-rank military officials throughout the Ming Dynasty and into the early Qing, and by third-rank military officials thereafter (see table p. [111](#)), “as well as by low-ranking eleventh-degree nobles,”<sup>78</sup> such as the husband of a princess, and first-grade imperial guards<sup>79</sup> (Fig. [296](#)).

## LION

Lions (*shī* 獅) were not indigenous to China, but were known in Iran and the Near East, where they were associated with royalty (Figs. [297](#), [298](#)). Their likenesses, pregnant with the religious power they had acquired in India as protectors of the gods (lions can be found on the outer walls of Hindu temples facing east) and later as “protectors of Buddhism,” probably entered China via the Silk Road. Real lions were actually sent to China as tribute as early as 87 CE.<sup>[80](#)</sup> Lion motifs have been found on Central Asian textiles dating back to the sixth century and could well have existed before this date although there are no known examples, textiles being fragile archaeological remains. “Many *jin* silk fragments found at the Turfan tomb sites featured lion motifs, for example in hunting scenes, with elephants and camels, and with oxen and elephants.”<sup>[81](#)</sup> The Chris Hall collection has a mid-sixth to early seventh-century garment with *jin* silk panels that show seated lions with raised paws<sup>[82](#)</sup> (Fig. [299](#)).

Lions were admired for their strength and courage, and hence were associated with military and hunting prowess. Their likenesses are found on Yuan/Ming period jade belt buckles, and their continued appearance on Chinese military badges of first-rank military officers during the Ming through early Qing, and second-rank military officers from 1662 on, attests to their success as symbols of power and majesty, although they never achieved the same local popularity as tigers (Fig. [300](#)).



Fig. 300 The embroidered badge of a first-or second-rank military official of the Ming Dynasty. Sixteenth century. Courtesy of the Chris Hall Collection Trust (on loan to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore).



Fig. 301 One of the four lions lining the walkway known as the Sacred Way to the Ming Tombs, Beijing.

These are the first animals encountered, as the order is lions, *xièzhì*, elephants, camels, *qílín*, horses. Courtesy of Angela Soeteber.

The character meaning “lion” (*shī* 獅) is composed of two parts: the radical on the left-hand side of the character means “animal,” while the main component on the right-hand side means “teacher” or “master” (*shī* 师). A homophone for “lion” is therefore “teacher or master.”

The majestic stone or bronze lions used to guard the entrances to official buildings and residences throughout the Chinese world, are usually depicted in pairs, the male playing with a ball and the female protecting her cub (Fig. 301). A pair of lions playing with a ball is considered auspicious, and although Williams writes that it “may have the same significance as two dragons fighting for the pearl of supremacy,”<sup>83</sup> a modern Chinese text describes its meaning as expressing “jubilation or happiness or wish[ing] people to have a successful career.”<sup>84</sup> Bronze lions in front of a residence indicated that the occupant was an official. The number of bumps on the lions’ heads, ranging from eight to thirteen, indicated the rank of the official whose house they guarded. First-rank officials had lions with thirteen bumps on their heads, the number decreasing with the official’s rank down to eight bumps, which indicated a sixth-rank official. Officials below this rank were not allowed lions outside their gates.<sup>85</sup>

Two lions, one larger and one smaller, literally a “senior lion-little lion” (*tàishī shàoshī*), has the additional interpretation of being the titles of two court positions of Imperial China, both of which were extremely prestigious and difficult to obtain: that of Grand Preceptor or the emperor’s teacher (*tàishī* 太师) and that of Junior Guardian or the crown prince’s mentor (*shàoshī* 少师). A larger and smaller lion featured together therefore expresses a wish for “success and honor in officialdom.”<sup>86</sup> There exists a beautiful antique Chinese wooden saddle, for example, with an arch decorated with a pair of lions.<sup>87</sup> This saddle was probably not used for actual riding (although Chinese saddles were made of wood), but was most likely a gift from a senior official to his mentor.

A simpler, less formal carving of a lone lion is most likely one of the numerous lion guardians still found in many parts of China. Yang Xianrang writes: “In many villages a two-faced stone lion acts as a guardian and in the streets stone lions act as street guardians. They are also found in front of, or on top of, the gates of houses. In rooms, there are minor stone lions which are also



guardians.”<sup>88</sup> He says that in northern Shaanxi even today, small statues of lions are tied to infants with red string to guard them against falling off their beds. Some lion figures are very tiny but all play the same role of guarding their owners from harm.

Lions figure prominently in Buddhist legend, particularly as guardians and mounts of Buddhist deities. Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, for example, rides a lion, as does, at times, Guānyīn, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

## MAKARA

A mythical animal often mistakenly identified as a dragon, the *makara* made its way as a Buddhist symbol into Chinese art from Tibet via India sometime during the Yuan Dynasty (Fig. 302). This hybrid water creature has a fearsome, fish-shaped body and is distinguished by its sharp lion-like paws and claws, elephant-like trunk, and crocodile-like lower jaw. It also has the tusks and ears of a wild boar and the staring eyes of a monkey. Flowing, flowery tendrils often issue from its mouth, which identify it as an ancient fertility symbol (although these are hard to reconcile with the fangs and claws). The two signs that will help you distinguish it from a dragon are the elephant-like snout and, when the whole body is depicted, the fact that a *makara* has only two front legs with a body that ends in a very unlikely floral-scroll tail. The Chinese understood the *makara* to be a member of the dragon family, so while *makara* are probably best known adorning Southeast Asian lintels, they can also be found on Chinese roofing tiles, textiles, and porcelain, especially during the Ming Dynasty. Other Buddhist symbols or motifs often accompany them.



Fig. 302 *Makara* have large fish-shaped bodies with an elephant-like trunk, the lower jaw of a crocodile, the tusks and ears of a wild boar, and the staring eyes of a monkey. Here two *makara* heads frame a large vat featuring a *kirtimukha* face, jewels streaming from its open mouth to form a “net of jewels.” Detail from the Songzanlin Si, a Tibetan Buddhist temple on the outskirts of Zhongdian, Yunnan, founded by the fifth Dalai Lama in the seventeenth century.

## MONKEY

The monkey (*hóu* 猴), one of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac, plays an important role in Chinese art and folklore for a number of reasons: its association with intelligence; its name, which has a homophone meaning “nobleman or high official” (*hóu* 侯); and its identification with reproduction in terms of “descendants” (*hòu* 后) (Figs. [304](#), [305](#)). It should be noted that depictions of what might more accurately be termed “apes” appear frequently on Han and Warring States Period artifacts. For example, strange little apes are seen romping in the shrubbery of landscapes depicting exotic mythological animals (Fig. [306](#)). This was a popular motif on graves as well as bronze mirrors. Apes are referred to in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, and Birrell tells us that “the term ape (*yü*) occurs in the names of many deities.”<sup>89</sup>

The most famous monkey of all is the legendary hero Sūn Wùkōng (孙悟空), who accompanies the devout Buddhist monk Xuánzàng (玄奘) in his historic search for Buddhist scriptures in the epic novel *Journey to the West* (Figs. [303](#), [307](#), [400](#), [536](#)). Also known as the Monkey King, he is a very popular character in Chinese paintings, cartoons, plays, films, and puppet shows. He is readily identifiable by his companions (a monk, pig, and ferocious water spirit) and his weapon, a magical staff that can be as small as a needle or as large as a pillar. Sūn Wùkōng is always clothed and depicted in clearly anthropomorphic poses. His most famous antic is stealing the peaches of immortality. A statue or painting of a monkey holding a (stolen) peach is a very common subject in Chinese art and sculpture.

The depiction of a more animal-like monkey holding a peach is more likely to represent the homophonous relationship that exists between “monkey” (*hóu* 猴) and “nobleman” (*hóu* 侯) (Fig. [309](#)). The most frequent tableau is known as *fēng hóu bào shǒu* (疯猴抱手), a “crazy monkey clutching [something] in its hand,” but it is really a rebus that should be understood as *fèng hóu bào shòu* (俸侯抱寿), “May you become a salaried official and embrace longevity [have a long

life].” Here is how the rebus works: *fēng* (瘋) means “crazy”; *fèng* (俸) means “salary”; *hóu* (猴) means “monkey”; and *hóu* (侯) means “nobleman, high official.” The *bào* (抱) used in both expressions means “hold, embrace, hug,” while *shǒu* (手) means “hand” and its homophone *shòu* (寿) means “longevity.”



Fig. 303 The most popular anthropomorphic monkey in Chinese literature is the legendary monkey hero Sūn Wùkōng. This simple drawing of him is functioning as a door god. Photographed in Yunnan.



Fig. 304 A contemporary papercut of a monkey, one of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac.



Fig. 305 Detail of a monkey from a decorative mural in the Beijing Hotel, Beijing.



Fig. 306 There is no mistaking these figures for apes. Apes figure frequently on Han and Warring States Period artifacts. They were also popular figures on tombs together with other animals. Rubbing from a Han Dynasty tomb. Courtesy of Liu Baisha.



Fig. 307 The Monkey King's most famous prank was stealing the peaches of immortality, and statues of him holding a peach (or two) are very popular. On his back is his magic staff, obtained from the dragon



kings of the oceans, which he uses to defeat his foes and obtain whatever catches his eye.



Fig. 308 The ingot in the smaller monkey's hands leaves no doubt as to the meaning of this carving, wishing its owner generations of descendants who will acquire official positions and wealth. The key is knowing that *hòu* can mean both "monkey" and "high official."



Fig. 309 An anthropomorphic monkey holds a giant lotus leaf on his head. Is there any hidden meaning to this sculpture? There could be, if you want to interpret the monkey as representing “a salaried official” [having the power] to hold peace (*hé* symbolized by the lotus leaf) in his hands.

A painting of a bee or wasp (*fēng* 蜂) and a monkey (*hóu* 猴) is a rebus for *fēng hóu* (封侯), playing on the *fēng* (封) that means “to confer [as with a title]” and the *hóu* (侯) meaning a “nobleman or high official.”<sup>90</sup> Taken together, the picture expresses the desire that the viewer or recipient be granted a title. A combination of a bee and a monkey is a popular base for building further pictorial messages.

For example, the coupling of a bee and a monkey with a hanging bird cage in the picture adds the additional pun *guà yīn* (挂音, “hanging sound”) where *yīn* can mean both “sound” (*yīn* 音) and “official seal” (*yìn* 印), and *gua* means “hang, put up” (*guà* 挂) as well as “to be concerned about” (*guà* 挂). A bee, monkey, and hanging birdcage (蜂猴挂音) thus contain the elements of the pun *fēng hóu guà yìn* (封侯挂印), wishing upon someone an appointment and the seals of office that go with it, literally “investiture of a title and possession of official seals.”<sup>91</sup>

If a monkey is pointing (*zhǐ* 指) at the sun (*rì* 日), the meaning is that the attainment of noble rank is close at hand. *Zhǐrì* is a shortened form of *zhǐrìkědài* (指日可待), “imminently expected” or “just around the corner.” It need not be a monkey doing the pointing either. Any figure pointing at the sun means the same thing.

Place the crazy monkey (*fēng hóu* 疯猴) on (*shàng* 上) the back (*hòu* 后) of a horse (*mǎ* 马) and you have a rebus that can be read as *mǎshàng fēnghóu* (马上封侯), “May you quickly be made an official” (*mǎshàng* meaning both “on the horse” and “right away, immediately”) (Fig. [308](#)).

Monkeys often represent two or even all three symbolisms. For example, one interpretation of a monkey (*hóu* 猴) on the back of a horse (*zài mǎshàng* 在马上) is the rebus meaning *hòu zài mǎshàng* (后在马上), which expresses the sentiment that the viewer see his descendants gain high office (one assumes through their intelligence, virtue, and hard work) through succeeding in the imperial examinations since successful candidates traditionally went home on horseback (*hòu* here representing both “descendants” and “high official”).

Another multilayered rebus described by Cammann is that of a baby monkey (*fēnghóu* 疯猴) being carried on the back (*bēi* 背) of another monkey (*hóu* 猴), which gives us the rebus components for *hòubēi fēnghóu* (后背封侯) or “May generations (*bèi* 辈) of [your] descendants (*hòu* 后) gain official (*hóu* 侯) salaries (*fèng* 俸), e.g. become government officials”<sup>92</sup> (Fig. [308](#)).

For an explanation of the group of animals, including a monkey, on the back of an elephant, see ELEPHANT p. [128](#).

## MOUSE

See RAT p. [142](#).

## OX

The ox (or water buffalo, *niú* 牛), another of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac, in Chinese art is identified with the life of the peasant, the most popular scene being that of a young male herder seated astride a water buffalo, usually playing a simple reed instrument (Fig. [310](#)). This popular rural motif is found on many a tile, statue, and simple painting in every Chinatown’s curio and souvenir shops. To some, this scene represents “a Buddhist metaphor for having attained nirvana through the realization that salvation lies within.... The ox is the true self, which the boy pacifies through contemplation. Reveling in his new knowledge, the boy makes joyful music as he returns home astride the beast he has mastered.”<sup>93</sup>

However, since oxen are emblematic of springtime and agriculture in general, the pastoral combination of herd boy and ox most probably symbolizes the ideal, simple life far away from the obligations and responsibilities of city or official life. The ox was an important animal in all wet-rice cultivation societies and we find its depiction dating back thousands of years either as a stand-alone ceramic object (Fig. [313](#)) or decorating ritual bronze drums. They were critical to a farmer's success and highly valued; as one traditional admonition reads, "Do not kill draught oxen or throw away written paper" (Fig. [312](#)). When the Chinese invented wheelbarrows, they referred to them as "wooden oxen" (*mùniú* 木牛). When the great philosopher (recognized today as the founder of Daoism) Lǎo Zi decided to depart his homeland, it was on the back of a black ox (see p. [170](#)).

One need travel only a little in China, however, to discover a good number of bronze oxen lining the shores of lakes and rivers. The practice dates back to the Tang Dynasty and is based upon the legend that Dà Yǔ (大禹), the legendary emperor who is credited with founding the Xia Dynasty (the first dynasty referred to in Chinese historical records, approximately 2100-1600? BCE) and controlling China's floodwaters, used to follow the practice of placing an iron ox alongside the waters of each of his projects. To most tourists, the most familiar ox is the bronze ox overlooking Lake Kunming in Beijing's Summer Palace (Fig. [315](#)). This ox was dedicated by the Emperor Qiánlóng in 1755, and if you look closely, you can see on its back the eighty-character poem composed by the emperor himself.<sup>[94](#)</sup>





Fig. 310 The cover of this small wooden, shell-inlaid box may depict a simple herdsboy playing his pipe instrument, heading home at the end of a day, or it may be hinting at a romantic reunion. The inclusion of the four magpies, which herald good news and are symbols of marriage and happiness, and four bats, which symbolize happiness, may identify the lad as one half of the pair of star-crossed lovers, the oxherd and the weaving maiden, who are only allowed to reunite one day a year on a bridge formed of magpies.



Fig. 311 A small modern carving of an ox or water buffalo, meant to recall a simpler time and place. Such small carvings are also popularly collected by individuals born in the various animal “years.”



Fig. 312 A stone ox in the tomb environs of one of the Han Emperor Wǔdì's (武帝, r. 141-87 BCE) favorites, Huò Qùbìng (霍去病). It was the emperor who ordered that stone carvings be made to decorate the grave mound in honor of the military successes of this illegitimate child of the elder sister of his favorite concubine. Photographed while visiting the Màolíng (茂陵) Museum, summer 2006.



Fig. 313 A recumbent jade water buffalo, symbolizing bucolic bliss. China, Ming Dynasty, 10.2 x 6.3 cm. Courtesy of Weisbrod Chinese Art Ltd, New York.



Fig. 314 A contemporary papercut of an ox, one of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac.



Fig. 315 A bronze ox sits at the edge of the Kunming Lake in Beijing's Summer Palace. The ox, cast in 1755, was personally dedicated by the Qiánlóng Emperor who wrote the eighty-character inscription that can still be seen on its back. This historic photo is reproduced from a Vandyke photogravure of a photograph by Donald Mennie, published in *The Pageant of Peking*, printed by Kelly & Walsh, Shanghai, 1920.



Fig. 316 While the warrior figures found in Xian's famous burial mounds are well known to all, many do not realize that the tombs also held all sorts of other figures, including farmyard animals. These pigs are grave goods, underscoring the valuable role the pig played in determining a family's prosperity.



Fig. 317 A contemporary papercut of a pig in a fertile garden rich with hanging gourds to symbolize abundance and fertility. The pig is one of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac.



Fig. 318 A rare yellow jade double vase dating to the seventeenth/eighteenth century combining a pig, a phoenix-like bird, and dragons. Courtesy of Sotheby's.

## PANTHER

Panthers (*bào* 豹), considered savage, cruel predators by the Chinese, when found on a Ming Dynasty rank badge identified a military officer of the sixth or seventh rank. In 1759, however, during the Qing, the rhinoceros replaced the panther in designating a seventh-rank officer and the panther alone came to designate a sixth-rank officer. Such rank badges usually portray a yellow or brown cat-like animal minus the distinctive markings of a tiger and the curly mane and tail of a lion.

A panther (*bào* 豹) and a magpie (colloquially known as *xǐque* 喜鹊) means “to announce (*bào* 报) pleasurable (*xǐ* 喜) news.” Otherwise, panthers are not commonly depicted in Chinese art.

## PIG

The pig (*zhū* 猪) is one of the most important animals in the Chinese economy, where ownership of a pig was a sign of wealth, rightly earning the pig its position as one of the twelve animals in the Chinese zodiac. Despite having several homophones, its symbolic meaning is restricted to the important role it plays as a sign of general prosperity, wealth, and overall good fortune (Figs. [316](#), [317](#)). One of the first characters foreigners learn when beginning their study of Chinese is the word for “family” (*jiā* 家), which depicts a pig under a roof. Duda tells us that “In Qing dynasty China, pig-shaped money receptacles became the ancestors of today’s ‘piggy-banks’. To insure prosperity, peasants placed papercuts of pigs on their houses,”<sup>95</sup> and jade pigs were placed in the hands of the wealthy deceased to ensure future prosperity.

A whole roast pig, known as a “golden pig” (*jīnzhū* 金猪), is the traditional offering to the gods but is rarely seen in Chinese art except for modern paintings of holidays or other celebrations as part of the scene.

Because of the pig’s association with family prosperity, art objects often combine pigs with other powerful family-oriented symbols, such as the dragon and phoenix. One example is the seventeenth to eighteenth-century rare yellow jade “double vase” offered at a Sotheby’s auction that featured a phoenix standing on the back of a pig, which in turn supported a small ewer that had a small dragon crawling up its side (Fig. [318](#)). This tower of three is juxtaposed and connected through their handles to a larger second (archaic) vase with another dragon on its side.<sup>96</sup>

## QÍLÍN

The Chinese mythical animal known in Chinese as the *qílín* (麒麟)<sup>97</sup> is sometimes erroneously referred to as the “Chinese unicorn,”<sup>98</sup> or even a chimera (although this is a specific Greek mythological animal with a lion’s head, goat’s body, and serpent’s tail) (Figs. [319-323](#)). The *qílín* is not a unicorn as it has two horns and



can be identified by its green (or blue) scaled deer's body (which has become more horse-shaped over time), dragon's head,<sup>99</sup> horn and hooves, topped with a bear's bushy tail.<sup>100</sup> It represents a number of positive attributes, including benevolence, virtue, "longevity, grandeur, felicity, illustrious offspring and wise administration."<sup>101</sup> The *qílín* is one of the animals that sometimes replaces the tiger, joining a phoenix, dragon, and tortoise in the grouping known as the Four Heraldic Animals, sometimes also referred to as the Four Intelligents (see DRAGON p. 121). Its appearance is said to signal wise administration and halcyon days.<sup>102</sup> Tradition notes that real *qílín* were last seen just before Confucius died. Their "presence in paintings and the decorative arts are a compliment to the reigning emperor."<sup>103</sup>

As a result of this symbolic significance, in 1662 the Kāngxī Emperor, on the urgings of his advisors, instated the mythical *qílín* as the highest symbol of rank amongst his military officers, replacing the lion on the military rank badges. There it remained until the fall of the empire in 1911.

Because the *qílín* is a symbol of honor and rank, one occasionally finds a Bodhisattva regally seated on a recumbent *qílín*.

Since *qílín* (麒麟) were said to live for 2,000 years, and have a homophone meaning "very old" that is used to refer to people over the age of sixty (*qí* 耆),<sup>104</sup> the animal represents longevity and old age as well as virtue and wisdom. This is the meaning when the *qílín* is found decorating buildings and ceramic platters and dishes, such as the examples found in the Topkapi Saray Collection in Istanbul (Fig. 321). On one such blue-and-white ceramic dish, the *qílín* stands alone, surrounded by bamboo and stony crags.

Curiously, *qílín* are also portrayed with babies on their backs, as it is said that they bring baby boys (*qílínsòngzi* 麒麟送子) to happy parents, making them the Chinese equivalent of the Western stork. Thus, small silver charms of infant males astride *qílín* were worn by women in the hope that they would conceive and bear healthy sons. How this benevolent creature of virtue and wisdom came to be associated with male progeny is unknown.

These special sons (brought by *qílín*) were also believed to be destined to become high-level civil servants, one of the greatest honors possible in traditional China, so there are also charms that depict young men in the robes of a scholar that would have been worn by young civil service candidates. To underscore the

desire for success, the *qílín* is sometimes surrounded or accompanied by peonies (see PEONY p. 34). Hence, the *qílín* is found on many decorative items associated with marriage as well as on articles of clothing worn by male children.<sup>105</sup>

Often confused with the *qílín* is another mythical being, usually referred to as the Beast of White Marsh and sometimes identified as a *báizé* (白泽).<sup>106</sup>

According to Jackson and Hugus, this mythical animal also has the head of a dragon with two horns and the body of a lion, but scales appear only on its shoulders and flanks in contrast with the *qílín*, whose entire body is covered with scales.<sup>107</sup> If in doubt, look at the animal's feet: the *qílín* has hooves whereas the *báizé* has claws.<sup>108</sup> During the Ming Dynasty, nobles and sons-in-law of the emperor were sometimes allowed to wear rank badges decorated with either a three-toed lesser dragon or one of these two mythical animals.<sup>109</sup>



Fig. 319 A banana tree stands to the right but the star of this painting is the *qílín*, a mythical animal with two horns, a scaled deer's body, a dragon's head, hooves, and a bushy bear-like tail. The stylized "flames" emanating from its body emphasize its magical abilities. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.



Fig. 320 A bronze *qilin* in Beijing's Forbidden City represents benevolence, virtue, longevity, grandeur, felicity, and wise administration. Courtesy of Angela Soeteber.



Fig. 321 A *qilin* as it appears on a ceramic dish in the Topkapi Seray Museum.



Fig. 322 Remember that *qilin* have two horns (as opposed to a single horn on the *xièzhi*) and hooves (as opposed to claws or paws, as on the *báizé*).



Fig. 323 A carving of a stone *qilin* found in a Yunnan courtyard. Its appearance was said to signal wise administration and halcyon days.



Fig. 324 Two hares gazing at the moon. Hares are said to beget their young by gazing at the moon. Detail from a modern screen. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.





Fig. 325 A contemporary papercut of a hare, one of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac.



Fig. 326 A delicately carved jade hare has special importance as a Daoist symbol associated with immortality and hence longevity. According to Chinese legend, a hare lives on the moon together with the Goddess of the Moon, pounding the elixir of immortality.



Fig. 327 Members of China's literati class collected such small objects as this ceramic water dropper. Hares would traditionally be made of white jade or porcelain to reflect their association with the moon. White glazed water dropper, eighteenth century, length 6.5 cm.

## RABBIT

A rabbit or **hare** (*tùzi* 兔子) is a very popular animal in Chinese art, appearing as a small carved jade or porcelain animal, or as the design on jewelry, small boxes,

porcelain, etc. (Fig. [325](#)). The rabbit has special importance as a Daoist symbol associated with immortality and hence longevity (Fig. [326](#)). According to Daoist legend, a “moon hare” (*yuètù* 月兔) lives on the moon together with the Goddess of the Moon, Cháng’è (see p. [206](#)), preparing an elixir of immortality from the bark of the cassia tree (see p. [24](#)) with a mortar and jade pestle. Buddhist legend also places the hare on the moon as a reward for offering itself as food to the Buddha. An allusion to a Jade Hare or Precious Hare (*yùtù* 玉兔) is thus a reference to the moon (Fig. [327](#)). A pair of hairpins on display in the Beijing Palace Museum collection depicts two white (*bái* 白) jade hares together with butterflies, ripe watermelons showing their dark seeds (jewels), and a variety of flowers, which were most likely intended to be worn at the time of the Moon or Mid-Autumn Festival during the eighth lunar month. The seasonal cluster carries the additional sentiment of a desire for longevity (the hares) through many offspring (the watermelon seeds).<sup>[110](#)</sup>

Hares are said to beget their young by gazing at the moon, so this is a common decorative theme pregnant with symbolism (Fig. [324](#)).

Artifacts or textiles bearing a rabbit are so strongly associated with women and the moon (*yīn* forces) that they would only have been worn by a woman or eunuch.<sup>[111](#)</sup>

A word of caution, however: not all rabbits found in Chinese scrolls or paintings are necessarily allusions to Daoist legends or the moon, although the overwhelming majority are. Since the rabbit is also one of the signs of the Chinese zodiac, it is sometimes injected into a design to show the year of origin or the birth year of the recipient.

## RAT

Because rats and **mice** proliferate so quickly and abundantly, and because they are good at sniffing out and finding hoards of food and good things to eat, they are associated with fertility, reproduction, wealth, and abundance (Fig. [329](#)). As a result, the Year of the Rat in the Chinese zodiac is especially popular as it is associated with the accumulation of wealth. The rat is traditionally the first animal in the Chinese zodiac cycle, which corresponds to the popular tale that when the Buddha called the animals to him, the rat was the first to arrive, earning it a decorative place on the Buddhist conch shells that call the faithful to

prayers.



**Fig. 328 Detail of a rat from a ceremonial Buddhist conch shell. Rats hold a revered place in Buddhism because of the legend that when the Buddha called the animals to him, the rat was the first to arrive.**



**Fig. 329 A contemporary papercut of a rat, the first of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac.**



**Fig. 330 A papercut detail of the young rat bride being borne to her new home. From a display in the Beijing Museum.**



Fig. 331 Singapore's popular Suntec City fountain has twelve Chinese zodiac medallions cast on the observation level. Artist Han Sai Por.

Rats and mice (*lǎoshǔ* 老鼠 and *shǔ* 鼠) are most commonly depicted with melons (*guā* 瓜), possibly because both have “fertility in abundance” connotations (Fig. 331). Interestingly, you may also one day find yourself looking at an anthropomorphic wedding tableau featuring rats or mice. This is an illustration from an old Chinese folk tale known as the “wedding of the rats” (*lǎoshǔ qǔ qīn* 老鼠娶亲) (Figs. 330, 332). In the folk tale, popularized through papercuts, folk paintings, and Chinese opera, the rat bride’s father, seeking to find the most prestigious candidate, selects a cat as his daughter’s groom, which ultimately eats his bride. This tale has entered the Chinese lunar New Year cycle of activities, and rural communities celebrate it on various days in the first lunar month by sprinkling grain and other foodstuffs on the ground as a contribution to the wedding feast.

Because rats are also credited with being able to undo knots, they “decorate knot picks and earpicks.... [They were] a popular gift for a young man going to take his civil service examinations, a rat pick supposedly helped him untie the knots in the questions.”<sup>112</sup> Squirrels are known as “pine tree mice” (see p. 144).

## RHINOCEROS

Rhinoceroses (*xī* 犀) were indigenous in southwest China until approximately the fourteenth century but then disappeared, probably because their useful hide, which was fashioned into armor, along with their valued horns, led to over-hunting. They are referred to frequently in the classic *Guideways through Mountains and Seas*, together with several mythological varieties, indicating that they were held in awe. Aside from these few references and a number of burial



figures (Fig. [333](#)),<sup>113</sup> they seldom appear in Chinese art, although the Shanghai Museum has a beautiful lobed Tang Dynasty bronze mirror featuring two rhinoceroses. The rhinoceros was used as a rank badge image to denote a military officer of the eighth rank in Imperial China during both the Ming and Qing Dynasties (see p. [111](#)).<sup>114</sup>

Rhinoceros horns (*xījiǎo* 犀角) were highly prized in China for their medicinal value and as objects of artistic value (Fig. [334](#)). From at least the fourth century BCE, the Chinese considered rhinoceros horn to be an antidote to poison, and many still believe they can cure a wide range of illnesses, from skin diseases to heart trouble and erectile dysfunction, despite any proof of their efficacy in any of these areas.



Fig. 332 An illustration from an old Chinese folk tale, often popularized through papercuts, peasant paintings, and Chinese opera, of a rat bride whose ambitious father has unwisely chosen a cat for her as her groom.

During the early Ming, imperial production houses imported rhinoceros horns for carving into cups and bowls for the emperor and his court. Works from this period are generally quite plain, with a minimum of embellishment. During the later Yǒnglè (永乐) Period (r. 1403-24), however, as a result of the increased trade kindled by the maritime expeditions of Admiral Zheng He (郑和), the decorative arts flourished. More rhinoceros horns were imported into China

and their popularity for decorative carving spread beyond the court. Designs from this period onward include stylized landscapes, literary scenes, bird and flower combinations, and other auspicious subjects. Later, during the Qing Dynasty, designs included highly ornate motifs that covered the entire horn. Archaic motifs derived from ancient bronzes also became popular. However, by the late Qing, the art of rhinoceros horn carving went into a decline. The import of rhinoceros horn into China was banned in 1993 in response to international concerns, although an illegal trade unfortunately continues to exist in both rhinoceros horns and horn powder.

A pair of rhinoceros horns belongs to the group of auspicious objects known as the Eight Precious Things (*bābǎo* 八宝) or Eight Auspicious Treasures (*bājíxiáng-bāoxāng* 八吉祥宝相) (see EIGHT p. [228](#)).

## **SHEEP**

Sheep and goats share the same generic term in Chinese, *yáng* (羊, see GOAT p. [130](#)), and comprise one of three groups of traditional Chinese “domesticated animals,” along with cows and pigs.

## **SQUIRREL**

Squirrels (*sōngshǔ* 松鼠, literally “pine tree mice”) are usually employed in Chinese art as a symbol for pine (*song* 松) to signify longevity (Figs. [335](#), [336](#)). The symbolism is then intensified by depicting the squirrels playing amongst grapes (*táo* 萄) or grapevines, which in turn is a homophone for peaches (*táozi* 桃子), another longevity symbol. A lovely Qing Dynasty hairpin that once belonged to one of China’s royal consorts or concubines, is decorated with two pairs of coral squirrels (one pair on each end of the flat hairpin) playing amongst a grapevine made of rubies, emeralds, tourmalines, and pearls.<sup>115</sup> This motif was popular during the late Qing and is frequently found on snuff bottles and other small, carved objects, or decorating a piece of porcelain. See GRAPES AND GRAPEVINES p. [53](#).



Fig. 333 An exquisite bronze rhinoceros probably dating from the Han Emperor Wǔdì's (武帝, r. 141-87 BCE) time. Photographed in the Màolíng (茂陵) Museum.



Fig. 334 Dehua (*blanc de chine*) ceramic in the shape of a rhinoceros horn libation cup. Rhinoceros horns were highly prized in China for both their medicinal and artistic value. © Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore. Gift of Frank and Pamela Hickley.



Fig. 335 A squirrel playing or running amongst grapes is a pun rebus symbolizing longevity. The pan is

based on the fact that squirrels are known in Chinese as “pine tree mice,” which provides the idea of pines for longevity, and grapes (*táo*), which sound like “peaches” (*táozi*), which also symbolize longevity. A small embroidered hanging made to resemble a lantern.



Fig. 336 Another squirrel in grapes, this time a detail from a child's decorative collar.

## TÀOTIÈ

Not to be confused with the *makara* (p. [136](#)) in Chinese art is another monster, known in Sanskrit as the *kirtimukha* and in Chinese as the Tàotiè (饕餮), although how or even “if” these two creatures are related historically or iconographically is debatable (Figs. [337](#), [338](#)). The Tàotiè (see Fig. [266](#)) is the face found on ancient Chinese bronze vessels. It consists of two piercing eyes, a nose, mouth, horns, and claws, and parts that can appear to be derived from a number of human, bird, and animal donors. Some believe it resembles an ancient dragon (the *kuilóng*). The Tàotiè is sometimes referred to as a “monster mask,” although there are at least two additional theories as to its meaning, the most common being that it was somehow related to blood sacrifices, and/or was a warning against gluttony. Some believe it is simply a decorative design without meaning, but that seems unlikely given its presence on ritual bronzes of great significance. Whatever its origins, it clearly had religious and/ or a magical meaning. Without textual references from the time, however, it is very difficult to determine its exact.





Fig. 337 A string of *kirtimukha* faces forms an architectural design along this temple wall in Pagan, Burma.



Fig. 338 A *kirtimukha* face spits forth ropes of flowers on this ceiling detail from the Songzanlin Si, Zhongdian, Yunnan.

The Tāotiè, however, bears a strong resemblance to the *kirtimukha* (the “Face of Glory”) of Hindu legends. Kirtimukha’s story is that having been created from the third eye of the god Shiva, it then offended Shiva, and when reprimanded, devoured its own body until only its head remained. Shiva then permitted the demon to live as a doorway guardian, where it is still found today, primarily on gables or tympanum. Remember that this figure consists of a face and hands only (no body, and often missing its lower jaw as well). It is also commonly depicted grasping its two tusks to allow a string or net of jewels to stream from its open mouth. It is a common architectural feature as a guardian above doorways and lintels, and as connected friezes, especially across temple walls.

## TIGER

The tiger (*lǎohǔ* 老虎 or simply *hǔ* 虎) is one of the oldest and most revered

animals in Chinese culture, and was a totem claimed by the ancient Qiang and Rong tribes, as well as the Yi, Bai, Buyi, and Tujia ethnic groups of southwest China (Figs. [210](#), [339](#)). Amongst the Tujia even today, the pattern known as the “white tiger head,” usually rendered as a white cross, is used for the protection of children.<sup>[119](#)</sup> In the ancient constellation groupings that once identified the four quadrants of the sky, known as *sìshén* (四神), a white tiger symbolized the seven constellations found in the west (see p. [110](#)). In ancient times, there was a ritual jade in the shape of a tiger (*hǔ* 琥) buried with the dead, facing west.

The tiger is a magnificent creature in Chinese folklore and art. It always represents strength, power, and courage, and, in particular, military prowess (Figs. [341](#), [373](#)). The tiger is therefore regarded as a protector and guardian.<sup>[120](#)</sup> One of the oldest pieces of evidence for the protective nature of tigers was the discovery of two large figures formed out of seashells, one a dragon and the other a tiger, on each side of a corpse in a grave at Puyáng, Henan Province.<sup>[121](#)</sup> And one of the pieces of Chinese clothing excavated in a tomb in Jiangling, Hubei Province, dating from the Warring States Period, features scores of tigers embroidered in scarlet, gold, silver, and black.<sup>[122](#)</sup>

“We learn from the Anyang [in Honan Province] oracle inscriptions that the tiger is conceived as being in close connection with the earth, and that the earth is the central point in all religious conceptions and sacrifices.”<sup>[123](#)</sup> The freestanding stone tigers (and owls) in the late Shang Dynasty royal tombs in Anyang represent some of the oldest statues in the round discovered by Chinese archaeologists.

A scene of a tiger chasing deer is one half of a pair of scenes that depict the two seasonal hunts “by the Khitan peoples of the Liao dynasty. Formal celebrations of these hunts were, however, probably Chinese in manner and go back at least to the Han Dynasty.”<sup>[124](#)</sup> The theme is known as *chūnshuǐ qiūshān* (春水秋山), literally “spring-water, autumn-mountain,” and the tiger and deer scene denotes the traditional autumn hunt. The traditional spring hunt is represented by a falcon chasing swans through foliage. These two scenes can be found carved in small jade plaques used to decorate men’s belts.

Successful candidates in the provincial examinations during Imperial China’s Ming and Qing Dynasties had their names entered publicly on a large sheet of white paper bearing the picture of a dragon on the right and a tiger on the left, probably in deference to their compass roles (cosmologically, dragons

represented the east and tigers the west).<sup>125</sup> An embroidered badge of a tiger denoted a third-or fourth-military officer rank during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, while a small wild cat denoted the sixth or seventh rank.

Because the Chinese believe that the character for “king” (*wáng* 王) appears naturally on the forehead of all tigers, it is often found on representations of tigers or even replacing the tiger. Tigers, like “all animals with long haired fur ... count as symbols of the feminine *yīn* and of the earth. Even in the much later Japanese Zen painting, the tiger appears as the symbol of the feminine *yīn*, whereas the dragon stands for the male *yáng*.”<sup>126</sup>



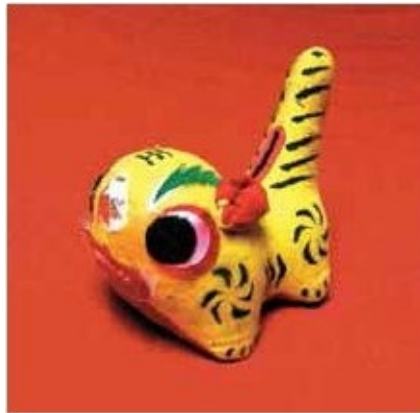
Fig. 339 The tiger's strength makes it the perfect protector and guardian of the gods. Here it serves as the guardian and protector of a Burmese *nat*.



Fig. 340 A contemporary papercut of a tiger, one of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac.



**Fig. 341 A statue of a tiger marks the point in a Yunnan gorge known as Leaping Tiger Gorge where a tiger was said to have escaped its pursuers. Tigers are perceived to have supernormal strengths and powers.**



**Figs. 342, 343 These handmade toy tigers protect young children as well as provide some fun.**



Fig. 344 A white tiger paper charm to be pasted on a door, purchased in a Yunnan country market The characters read *Báihù Shénjūn* or [honorific] “The Divine White Tiger.” The White Tiger was one of the four original compass animals, representing the direction west, and was thus imbued with special powers.



Fig. 345 Clothing decorated with tigers was believed to protect its wearers. Tigers and dragons decorate this child’s jacket. Dragons represent the male forces and tigers the feminine forces of nature. Courtesy of Don Cohn.

Because tigers are one of China’s oldest symbols, they have always been an especially popular motif, and figure prominently in art for the masses, or folk art. The very word “protect” is a homophone (*hù* of the word for “tiger” (*hǔ* 虎). They appear in every form of folk art, and even today villagers in the provinces of Shaanxi, Gansu, and Shanxi make steamed flour cakes in the shape of tigers as talismans against seen and unseen evils.<sup>127</sup> Small stuffed tigers are popular soft toys (Figs. [342](#), [343](#)).

Tigers were very popular on male children’s clothing, and are one of the most



common patterns on the decorative caps, bibs, shoes, and *dōudu* (兜肚, a biblike undergarment that covers the chest and abdomen), once worn for holidays and important events (Fig. [345](#)). An entire child's cap might represent a tiger's head, complete with ears and whiskers (Figs. [346](#), [347](#)). "A mother always hopes that her children will be as strong and healthy as the tiger."<sup>128</sup>

The Victoria & Albert Museum in London has in its collection a very fine Cizhou ware pillow from northern China in the shape of a tiger, dating back to the Song Dynasty (approximately 1175-1200), time dangers (Fig. [348](#)). On New Year's Eve, pictures of tigers were hung alongside doorways to frighten away evil spirits, and while a painting of a tiger in a bamboo grove might appear to be innocuous, its message to viewers is that of "courage coupled with endurance" (Fig. [210](#)). Traditional ancestral portraits were once painted with their subjects seated stiffly on formal chairs, their feet on a tiger mat.



Fig. 346 The character for king (*wáng* 王) is often displayed on the front of a child's protective tiger hat as it is believed that this is the character that appears in the natural markings of a tiger's brow.



Fig. 347 The back of the tiger hat, showing its life-like tail.



Fig. 348 Ceramic tiger pillows served the same role as other charms, protecting their users.

Mugwort (*ài* 艾) tiger decorations appear at the time of the Dragon Boat Festival in Shanxi. In the past, mugwort leaves, said to have protective qualities because the leaf resembles a tiger's paw, were cut into the shape of a tiger, or paper cutouts of tigers were pasted onto mugwort leaves and worn by women during the festival (see *ARTEMISIA LEAF* p. [20](#)). Today, they are more commonly found as embroidered designs or cotton cloth decorations.<sup>[129](#)</sup> There is even a special charm called an *àihǔ* (艾虎), comprising a tiger's face and mugwort, that is still hung on the doors of rural homes on the fifth day of the fifth month as protection from malignant elements (see *FIVE* p. [226](#)).

Tigers are also considered to be very ferocious animals, and more than one Chinese legend and folk tale involves a tiger attacking a defenceless young woman, for example, the story of Princess Wencheng of the Tang Dynasty, the niece of Emperor Tàizōng (太宗, r. 627–50), who was sent to Tibet as a fifteen-year-old to become the bride of Songtsan Gambo, in order to unite the two kingdoms. Lhasa's famous Potala Palace was built by Songtsan Gambo for this bride, who is also credited, together with Gambo's second wife, with converting her husband to Buddhism. They were later canonized as Buddhism's white and green Taras.

Five tigers together represent the Five Tiger Generals (*wǔhǔjiàng* 五虎将) of the Kingdom of Shu during the period known as the Three Kingdoms in Chinese history, later made famous in the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. They are Guān Yǔ (关云), the group's leader, perhaps better known as Guāngōng (關公) or Guāndì (關帝, see p. [161](#)), Zhāng Fēi (张飞), Zhào Yún (赵云), Mǎ Chāo (马

超), and Huáng Zhōng (黃忠).<sup>130</sup>

Because the Gods of Wealth, especially Guāngōng, are sometimes shown standing on a tiger, tigers are also associated with wealth.<sup>131</sup> A fierce tiger on its rear legs clutching a Chinese coin marked gambling dens in pre-Revolution China.

## TOMB GUARDIAN

See EARTH SPIRIT p. <sup>128</sup>.

## WATER BUFFALO

See OX p. <sup>139</sup>.

## WOLF

A common folk tale concerning a treacherous wolf (*láng* 狼) and a naïve scholar, Master Dōngguō, is known to every schoolchild in China<sup>132</sup> (Fig. <sup>349</sup>). Its simple theme of a wolf that threatens to eat the man who has helped him out of a jam by hiding him in a sack, serves as an example both of the dangers of pedantry and limitless ingratitude. It occasionally appears as an illustration in folk art, and the “wolf of Zhòngshān” has come to represent greed and cruelty; in short, he is an ingrate.

## XIÈZHÌ

The fierce mythical creature known in Chinese as a *xièzhì* (獬豸) “was a white creature with a dragon’s head, a lion’s body, a bear’s tail, a mane, paws [*not* hooves], and a single horn on it[s] head.”<sup>133</sup> Its ability, however, to discern truth from lies, and its formidable habit of immediately piercing liars with its single horn, made it the emblem of the special group of court officials known as the Censoriate. There is a Chinese legend that dates back to the Classics, specifically the *Book of History* and the *Book of Poetry*, about a Xia Dynasty judge by the name of Gāo Yáo (皋陶) who had such a creature that was able to detect the guilty from the innocent. When Gāo Yáo needed assistance, he would ask the *xièzhì* to butt the guilty party.<sup>134</sup> The *xièzhì* was a particularly apt symbol for the

Censoriate's rank badges and can also be found embroidered on seat cushions and other important household display textiles. Gāo Yáo (皋陶), recognized as the Chinese God of Justice, is also credited with codifying the first body of law in China.

Visitors to Nanjing can view two impressive pairs of stone *xièzhì*, one pair standing, the other kneeling, in the Xiaoling Mausoleum, the mausoleum of the first Ming Dynasty emperor, Zhū Yuánzhāng (朱元璋, r. 1368–98), who took the reign name Hóngwǔ (洪武, “Vast Military Power”<sup>135</sup> (Fig. 351). This is one of the largest imperial mausoleums in China, and the *xièzhì* are located along the spirit path of twenty-four animal and eight human figures, between the two pairs of lions and two pairs of camels. There are also four *xièzhì* statues on the road leading to the thirteen Ming tombs in Beijing (Fig. 350).

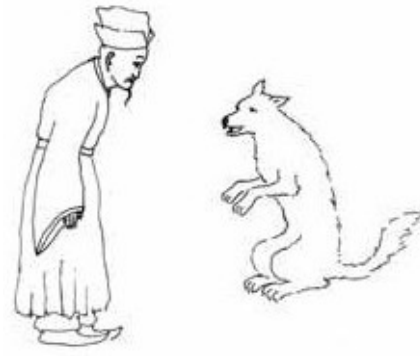


Fig. 349 Master Dōngguō and the wolf who first begs for his help and then fatally tricks him, teaches the dangers of pedantry and limitless ingratitude to young readers and listeners. Courtesy of Sonja Bjaaland.



Fig. 350 One of the four *xièzhì* along the spirit path leading to the Ming tombs in the outskirts of Beijing. Although these mythical beasts are described as having paws, not hooves, these statues appear to have hooves, which shows there is some confusion. Its single horn, however, is non-negotiable. Courtesy of Angela Soeteber.



Fig. 351 The first Ming Emperor Hóngwǔ in this very flattering official portrait painted approximately ten years after he became emperor. In reality, he was said to have been very unattractive. He ruled from 1368 to 1398 and when he died, at the age of seventy, thirty-eight concubines accompanied him to the grave.



## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ong Hean-Tatt, *Chinese Animal Symbolisms*, Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 1993, and Patricia Bjaaland Welch, *Chinese New Year*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 1-3.
- <sup>2</sup> Sarah E. Thompson, “The Twelve Animals in Unified Silla, Tang China, and Nara Japan,” *Oriental Art*, Vol. 49, No. 5, 2004, p. [23](#).
- <sup>3</sup> See phoenix p. [80](#).
- <sup>4</sup> A designation most likely earned by the tortoise because its plastrons resembled a suit of armor. Interestingly, over the years this figure evolved into a superhuman warrior god who was eventually adopted as the protector of the Ming imperial household under the name Zhēnwǔ or Perfected Warrior (真武). The imperial cult of Zhēnwǔ was especially patronized by the Yǒnglè Emperor (永乐 r. 1403–24). The north gate of the Forbidden City was once known as the *xuánwǔ ǔ mén* (玄武), but since one of the names of the Kāngxī Emperor (康熙, r. 1661–1722) was Xuányè, the name of the gate had to be changed to *shénwǔ ǔ mén* (神武门). Many believe that the evolution of this ancient symbol into a protector god was helped by his association with the direction north, where many of China’s traditional enemies hailed from. Zhēnwǔ is still revered today. There is a very famous temple devoted to him on Mt Wudang in Hubei Province, also considered the birthplace of Taiji. *Tàijíquán* (太极拳) is the series of mental and physical movements or exercises popularly known as Chinese shadowboxing. Zhēnwǔ is sometimes also referred to as the Daoist God of the North.
- <sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the historical evolution of these four animals, see page 237, fn 6.
- <sup>6</sup> Claudia Brown, *Weaving’s China’s Past: The Amy S. Clague Collection of Chinese Textiles*, exhibition catalogue, Phoenix, Arizona: Phoenix Art Museum, 2000, p. [24](#).
- <sup>7</sup> Jessica Rawson, *Chinese Decoration*, London: British Museum Press, 1995, p. [92](#).
- <sup>8</sup> Display card, Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois, USA.
- <sup>9</sup> This is also the name given a constellation of seven stars in the western sky. Seven was the original number of stars depicted in the constellation that figured as one of the Twelve Symbols of Imperial Authority found on an emperor’s robe. It later was reduced to three stars, representing the handle of the Big Dipper alone.
- <sup>10</sup> Werner Speiser, *The Art of China: Spirit and Society*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1966, p. [37](#).
- <sup>11</sup> In 1393, the animals were, by rank: first and second, lion; third and fourth, tiger or leopard; fifth, bear; sixth and seventh, panther; eighth and ninth, rhinoceros or seahorse. In 1537, the eighth and ninth ranks were separated so that the rhinoceros was used to designate eighth-rank military officers and the seahorse ninth-rank military officers. During the Kāngxī era, the order became, by rank: first, *qílín*; second, lion; third, leopard; fourth, tiger; fifth, bear; sixth, panther; seventh and eighth, rhinoceros; ninth, seahorse.
- <sup>12</sup> Raymond Li, *A Glossary of Chinese Snuff Bottle Rebus: Re-discovering the Hidden Internal Beauty in*

*Snuff Bottles*, Hong Kong: Nine Dragons, 1976, p. [14](#).

- [13](#) Schuyler Cammann notes in *Substance and Symbol in Chinese Toggles: Chinese Belt Toggles from the C. F. Bieber Collection* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962, p. [131](#)) that because the pronunciation of the first syllable in “butterfly” (*hú*) in some dialects resembles that for “joy” (*fú*), the confusion may have been linguistic in origin.
- [14](#) Roberta Helmer Stalberg and Ruth Nesi, *China’s Crafts: The Story of How They’re Made and What They Mean*, New York: Eurasia Press, 1980, p. [40](#).
- [15](#) See, for example, this interpretation in Eugene Wang and Zheng Yan, “Romancing the Stone: An Archway in Shandong,” *Orientations*, Vol. 35, No. 22, 2004, p. [96](#).
- [16](#) Wang Qingzheng (trans. Lillian Chin and Jay Xu), *A Dictionary of Chinese Ceramics*, Singapore: Sun Tree Publishing, 2002, p. [37](#).
- [17](#) The latter happiness is, of course, a reference to passing the imperial examinations. See Ichisada Miyazaki (trans. Conrad Schirokauer), *China’s Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1976, p. [86](#).
- [18](#) Teresa Tse Bartholomew, *Myths and Rebuses in Chinese Art*, exhibition pamphlet, California: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1988, p. [18](#).
- [19](#) Jessica Rawson, *Chinese Jade: From the Neolithic to the Qing*, London: British Museum Press, 1995, p. 359. Bears are briefly referred to in *Guideways through Mountains and Seas*, a text compiled from the Warring States Period to the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–CE 8).
- [20](#) See, for example, Sotheby’s, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, auction catalogue, New York, March 23, 2004, lot #258, pp. [110–11](#).
- [21](#) Raymond Li, *A Glossary of Chinese Snuff Bottle Rebus*, p. [22](#).
- [22](#) The *Shānhǎi jīng* (山海经), sometimes translated as *Guideways through Mountains and Seas* (see, for example, Richard E. Strassberg’s translation in *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways through Mountains and Seas*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) and sometimes as the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (see Anne Birrell’s work, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, London: Penguin Classics, 1999).
- [23](#) Warren Cox, *Chinese Ivory Sculpture*, New York: Bonanza Books, 1946, p. [62](#).
- [24](#) Ibid. This museum holds much of the collection from the Capt. Marshall Field Expedition to China of 1923.
- [25](#) Zhou Xun and Gao Chunming. *5000 Years of Chinese Costumes*, Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1984, p. [136](#).
- [26](#) See Wong Hwei Lian and Szan Tan (eds.), *Power Dressing: Textiles for Rulers and Priests from the Chris Hall Collection*, exhibition catalogue, Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2006, p. 281.
- [27](#) Miyazaki, *China’s Examination Hell*, p. [56](#). The poem reads: “With pleased sounds the deer call to one another.... I have here admirable guests.... With pleased sounds the deer call to one another.... I have good wine, which my admirable guests drink, enjoying themselves. With pleased sounds the deer call to one another.... I have good wine, to feast and make glad the hearts of my admirable guests.”

Translation by Arthur Waley.

- [28](#) The best-known Six Harmonies is the Six Harmonies Pagoda, which lies on the north bank of the Qiantang River in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province. First built in CE 970 by the King of Wuyue State, the pagoda fell into ruin and went through several reconstructions before being listed as one of China's key national cultural heritages in 1961.
- [29](#) Wong and Szan, *Power Dressing*, p. [119](#). Examples of this motif can be seen in the Chris Hall textile and Cleveland Museum of Art collections.
- [30](#) Yang Xianrang and Yang Yang, *Chinese Folk Art*, Beijing: New World Press, 2000, p. [145](#).
- [31](#) Yang Lihui and An Deming, with Jessica Anderson Turner, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology, Handbooks of World Mythology*, Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2005, p. [53](#).
- [32](#) In 1996, the tomb that has been honored for more than 2,000 years as Fúxī's tomb, was designated a key historical monument and placed under national protection. The annual fair sponsored by the temple has become a very popular tourist attraction.
- [33](#) Yang Xianrang and Yang Yang, *Chinese Folk Art*, p. [155](#).
- [34](#) C. A. S. Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, 3rd edn, New York: Dover Publications, 1976, p. [125](#).
- [35](#) See Sotheby's, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, lot #221, p. [99](#).
- [36](#) Cammann, *Substance and Symbol in Chinese Toggles*, p. [128](#).
- [37](#) See, for example, Sotheby's, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, item #102, p. [53](#).
- [38](#) Margaret Duda, *Four Centures of Silver: Personal Adornment in the Qing Dynasty and After*, Singapore: Times Editions, 2002, p. [86](#).
- [39](#) Zhao Feng, "Symbols of Power and Prestige: Sun, Moon, Dragon and Phoenix Motifs on Silk Textiles," in Wong Hwei Lian and Szan Tan (eds.), *Power Dressing: Textiles for Rulers and Priests from the Chris Hall Collection*, exhibition catalogue, Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2006, pp. [38–9](#).
- [40](#) Williams' list of nine in *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives* differs from this more recent list published by Ye Yingsui, Ye Shuqin, and Ye Duyi in *Auspicious Designs of China* (Beijing: China Travel & Tourism Press, 2002). The primary differences are that the newer list combines two of Williams' list (Bìxì and Bàxià) into one so it can add the "door-knocker" dragon Jiāotú (椒图), replaces a musical dragon (whom Williams lists as Qíuniú 囚牛) with Tàotiè (饕餮), and replaces a dragon described as sitting on the eaves of temples (Cháofēng 朝凤) with the bridge dragon Gōngfū (蚣虺).
- [41](#) Evelyn Lip, *Chinese Temples and Deities*, Singapore: Times Books International, 1981, p. [81](#).
- [42](#) If you should encounter a dragon with hooves instead of claws, you are most likely viewing a very unusual piece. See Judith Rutherford, "Uncut Textiles," in Judith Rutherford and Jackie Menzies (eds.), *Celestial Silks: Chinese Religious and Court Textiles*, exhibition catalogue, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004, p. [100](#), credited to personal correspondence with Schuyler Cammann in 1991: "It is not clear who would have worn such a dragon image during the Ming dynasty, although in the Qing dynasty they were given as awards to high-ranking Han Chinese officials and statesmen, who were not Manchu members of the imperial family and hence not allowed to wear dragons with claws."

- [43](#) Soame Jenyns in *A Background to Chinese Painting*, New York: Schocken Books, 1966, p. [181](#), reports nine different similarities: “head like that of a bull, the muzzle like a donkey’s, the eyes like a shrimp’s, the horns like those of a deer, the ears like an elephant’s, the scales like those of fishes, the beard like a man’s, the body like a serpent’s, the feet like the Feng-bird’s.”
- [44](#) Ibid.
- [45](#) Rank badges can be found with both the *dǒuniú* and the *fēiyú*. The former was awarded by the emperor to court officials as a special sign of approval, whereas the latter was awarded to eunuchs and officials who had distinguished themselves. Both were most highly coveted.
- [46](#) Literary references exist, however, from the Han Dynasty. See Brown, *Weaving’s China’s Past*, p. [33](#).
- [47](#) Ibid.
- [48](#) Ibid.
- [49](#) Ibid., pp. [33–5](#).
- [50](#) If there are embroidered flowers in the waves, the robe was the possession of a high-ranking female member of the court. See, for example, the magnificent example in Judith Rutherford, “Celestial Silks,” *Arts of Asia*, Vol. 34, No. 4, p. [17](#).
- [51](#) [www.shaolingongfu.com/english/index2](http://www.shaolingongfu.com/english/index2). In November 1995, the Chinese Post Office issued a set of four stamps featuring these beautiful mountains.
- [52](#) This story was the focus of a 1974 Shaw Brothers’ film called *Na Cha*.
- [53](#) Robert van Gulik is one of the foremost experts in this area, and readers are referred to his many works. Many museums, however, have one or more pieces tucked away in their collections. One of the author’s favorites is a small bronze mirror dating back to the Yuan Dynasty that is part of the Cleveland Museum of Art’s collection.
- [54](#) Many museums have a pair, as they were very common and popular tomb figures, but a particularly fine pair is in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington DC.
- [55](#) The first gift of a domesticated elephant is recorded as occurring in 121 BCE by the people of Nan Yüe to the Emperor Wǔdì of the Han Dynasty.
- [56](#) The Louvre possesses a beautiful Zhou bronze ritual vessel in the shape of an elephant. See Cox, *Chinese Ivory Sculpture*, p. [34](#).
- [57](#) Apparently due to “a deterioration of the climate in a land of intensive agriculture.” See Speiser, *The Art of China*, p. [158](#).
- [58](#) Guo Feng and Sun Meng (trans. Li Ziliang), “Chinese Auspicious Patterns (V): Peace and Prosperity Accompany the Elephant,” *Chinese Literature Magazine* (Beijing), No. 5, 2000.
- [59](#) See Wang and Zheng, “Romancing the Stone,” pp. [90–7](#).
- [60](#) Stalberg and Nesi, *China’s Crafts*, p. [154](#).
- [61](#) Guo and Sun, “Chinese Auspicious Patterns.”
- [62](#) Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, London: Serindia Publications, n.d., p. [95](#).
- [63](#) Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, p. [201](#).

- [64](#) The Freer Gallery of Art, Washington DC, has a wonderful early fourteenth-century Yuan Dynasty scroll (ink on paper) in its collection painted by Zhào Mèngfǔ (趙孟頫, 1254–1322) entitled *Sheep and Goat*, which depicts the two standing side by side, clearly distinguishable – the ram on the left with its curly hair and curved horns, the goat on the right with its long, shaggy, straight hair and slanted horns. This painting so moved the famous Qing Emperor Qiánlóng (乾隆) that he added his own verse and seal to the original manuscript while it was in his possession. See Fig. [282](#).
- [65](#) Ni Yibin, “The Anatomy of Rebus in Chinese Decorative Arts,” *Oriental Art*, Vol. 49, No. 3, [2004], p. [12](#).
- [66](#) Also sometimes translated as “spring returns to the earth and everything looks fresh and gay.” Li Zuding (chief ed.), *Chinese Traditional Auspicious Patterns*, PRC: Shanghai Popular Science Press, 1989, p. [129](#). *Sānyángkāitài* is from the Chinese classic *Yìjīng* (易经, *Book of Changes*).
- [67](#) John Blofeld, *I Ching (The Book of Change): A New Translation of the Ancient Chinese Text with Detailed Instructions for its Practical Use in Divination*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968, p. [110](#).
- [68](#) The Chris Hall textile collection has a pair of Ming Dynasty Wànlì (万历, r. 1573–1620) Period embroidered badges with phoenixes and three goats “seated on red mounds that may represent the sun.” See Wong and Szan, *Power Dressing*, p. [185](#).
- [69](#) 段建华, 中国吉祥装饰设计 [Duàn Jiàn huá, *Chinese Auspicious Decoration Design*], 北京: 中国轻工业出版社 [May 1, 1999], p. [43](#). Several such stone kneeling sheep can be seen in the fields surrounding the Tang Dynasty tombs to the west of Xian.
- [70](#) See, for example, this motif on item #214, Sotheby’s, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, p. [97](#). The story of Sū Wǔ serves as a moral fable, teaching children the virtue of perseverance.
- [71](#) Hellmut Wilhelm (trans. Gary F. Baynes), *Change: Eight Lectures on the I Ching*, New York: Harper & Row, 1960, p. 28.
- [72](#) Ann Paludan, *Chronicles of the Chinese Emperors*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1998, p. [94](#).
- [73](#) The source of the designation “Heavenly” is derived from their origin in the Tiānshān mountains in the “west”.
- [74](#) Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*, pp. [236–7](#), quoting from *Researches into Lost Records*, from the fourth to sixth century, attributed to Wang Chia.
- [75](#) Sotheby’s, *100 Selected Chinese and Korean Ceramics from the Toguri Collection*, auction catalogue, London, June 9, 2004, p. [53](#).
- [76](#) Sotheby’s, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, item #81, p. [46](#).
- [77](#) 段建华, 中国吉祥装饰设计, pp. [11](#), [46](#).
- [78](#) *Clothed to Rule the Universe: Ming and Qing Dynasty Textiles at the Art Institute of Chicago*, Chicago, Illinois: The Art Institute of Chicago in association with University of Washington Press, 2000, p. [54](#).
- [79](#) Wong and Szan, *Power Dressing*, p. [235](#).
- [80](#) W. Perceval Yetts, “Symbolism in Chinese Art,” lecture delivered at the China Society, London, January 18, 1912, Singapore: Cybille Orient Gallery, 1984, p. [26](#).



- [81](#) Judith Rutherford and Jackie Menzies (eds.), *Celestial Silks: Chinese Religious and Court Textiles*, exhibition catalogue, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004, p. [19](#).
- [82](#) Wong and Szan, *Power Dressing*, p. [103](#).
- [83](#) Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, p. [254](#).
- [84](#) Ye, Ye, and Ye, *Auspicious Designs of China*, p. [129](#).
- [85](#) [www.thebeijingguide.com](http://www.thebeijingguide.com)
- [86](#) An excellent example of this is the north portal of the Anshang archway in Shandong, where each direction of the portal has a separate animal-related pun. See Wang and Zheng, “Romancing the Stone,” pp. [90–7](#).
- [87](#) Offered for sale by Ichiban Japanese & Oriental Antiques, Marion, Connecticut, USA, summer 2004.
- [88](#) Yang and Yang, *Chinese Folk Art*, p. [143](#).
- [89](#) Birrell, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, p. [199](#).
- [90](#) Sometimes translated as “Marquis.”
- [91](#) See Wang and Zheng, “Romancing the Stone,” p. [93](#).
- [92](#) Cammann, *Substance and Symbol in Chinese Toggles*, p. [124](#). This is refuted by Dr Ni Yibin, who claims that “the monkey on the horse is always a calm and cute one.” See his “The Anatomy of Rebus in Chinese Decorative Arts,” p. [23](#).
- [93](#) Duda, *Four Centuries of Silver*, p. [86](#).
- [94](#) When the Summer Palace was raided and destroyed by Anglo-French forces in 1860, one participant (Lt. Col. Wolseley in *Narrative of the War with China in 1860*) wrote, the ox was “so truly life-like that all who saw it mistook it for a veritable animal till they had actually approached it.” Six years later, a Chinese poet (Wang Kaiyun) wrote of the devastation of the site: “Jade Fountain laments and Kunming mourns, Alone guards the Bronze Ox, the thistles and thorns; In the hills of blue iris, the fox calls in the night, Neath the bridge of soft ripples, fish weep at the sight.”
- [95](#) Duda, *Four Centuries of Silver*, p. [87](#).
- [96](#) Sotheby’s, *Emperor and Scholar*, auction catalogue, Hong Kong, April 25, 2004, p. [190](#).
- [97](#) The male is known as *qí*; the female, which lacks horns, is known as *lín*. They may be better known to readers by their Japanese name *kirin*.
- [98](#) It is sometimes confused with another mythical one-horned “sacred” or “heavenly deer” known as the *tiānlù* (天鹿). See Rawson, *Chinese Ornament*, p. [108](#).
- [99](#) It is sometimes known as the “Dragon Horse” (*lóngmǎ* 龙马).
- [100](#) There is a beautiful painted ivory folding fan dating back to 1730 in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London featuring a number of mythical birds and beasts, including a pair of *qílín*, easily identifiable by their blue bodies, pair of horns, hoofed feet, and bushy tails.
- [101](#) Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, p. 414.

- [102](#) *Qilin* are said to have been prevalent during the time of the sage kings Yáo and Shùn.
- [103](#) Julia B. Curtis, "Tales Told in Porcelain: Jingdezhen Blue-and-White Wares at the San Antonio Museum of Art," *Oriental Arts*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2005, p. [49](#).
- [104](#) If deconstructed, the top half of the character literally means "old" (老).
- [105](#) Nancy Berliner, "An Inventory of Eight Generations: Objects from the Yin Yu Tang Household," *Oriental Arts*, Vol. 34, No. 6, 2003, p. [49](#).
- [106](#) See Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction*, Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, p. [236](#). "This god in bestial form knows the infinitesimal number of metamorphosed beings and the mystery of the cosmos. The quest of the Yellow Emperor for divine knowledge is cast in the heroic mold, and his success is crowned with the reward of the chart of the cosmos, for knowledge is power."
- [107](#) Beverley Jackson and David Hugus, *Ladder to the Clouds: Intrigue and Tradition in Chinese Rank*, Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 1999, p. [110](#).
- [108](#) Professor Richard Strassberg, an authority on Chinese mythical beasts, notes, however, that "There is no one real description of it. Like many mythological beasts, various sources describe it in different ways." Personal correspondence, January 5, 2005. See also Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary*, pp. [64–6](#).
- [109](#) Jackson and Hugus, *Ladder to the Clouds*, p. [110](#).
- [110](#) For another "rabbit hairpin," see lotus p. [27](#).
- [111](#) Jackson and Hugus, *Ladder to the Clouds*, p. [114](#). Schuyler Cammann, in *China's Dragon Robes* (New York: Ronald Press, 1952, p. [38](#)), also reports an early Qing four-dragon robe found in a tomb, with the "100 Antiques" pattern on both sides of the main dragons, and a small *qilin* prancing in the waves near the hem.
- [112](#) Duda, *Four Centuries of Silver*, p. [87](#).
- [113](#) For an example, see the earthenware and lead glass burial figure of a rhinoceros dating from the Han Dynasty in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. Another famous rhinoceros-shaped vessel inlaid with gold and silver dating back to the Warring States Period has been found in Shaanxi Province.
- [114](#) After 1759, the rhinoceros was also the symbol for seventh-grade military officers. Such rank badges are exceedingly rare and few collectors have ever seen an authentic one (collectors beware!). See Jackson and Hugus, *Ladder to the Clouds*, p. [133](#).
- [115](#) This is in the National Museum collection, Beijing.
- [116](#) More commonly known by its Wade-Giles format, T'ao t'ieh.
- [117](#) They are described as having a turned-up snout, and are always shown in profile with only one leg visible.
- [118](#) Yang and Yang, *Chinese Folk Art*, p. [12](#).
- [119](#) Eric Boudot, in a talk given in Hong Kong on September 13, 2005 for the Hong Kong Textile Society.
- [120](#) It is no accident that one of Asia's most popular over-the-counter medicinal salves is called Tiger Balm™.

- [121](#) Yang and Yang, *Chinese Folk Art*, pp. [19–20](#).
- [122](#) Zhou and Gao, *5000 Years of Chinese Costumes*, p. [23](#).
- [123](#) Speiser, *The Art of China*, p. [36](#).
- [124](#) Rawson, *Chinese Jade*, p. 335.
- [125](#) Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell*, p. [55](#), [126](#) Speiser, *The Art of China*, p. [36](#)
- [127](#) Yang and Yang, *Chinese Folk Art*, p. [43](#). A 1940s travel account through southern China by Nicol Smith, *Burma Road*, New York: Garden City Publishing, 1940, p. [144](#), records that “where deaths from cholera had been just then reported, one would see among the people on the streets hundreds who walked with handkerchiefs held to their noses. In these handkerchiefs were pieces of camphor, carved into the forms of dragons, tigers, and other wild beasts, to frighten away the cholera-devils.”
- [128](#) Yang and Yang, *Chinese Folk Art*, p. [75](#).
- [129](#) *Ibid.*, p. [119](#).
- [130](#) Raymond Li, *A Glossary of Chinese Snuff Bottle Rebus*, p. [48](#).
- [131](#) See, for example, Scott Minick and Jiao Ping, *Arts and Crafts of China*, Singapore: Thames & Hudson, 1996, p. [20](#), and Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, p. 399.
- [132](#) Its title in Chinese is 东郭先生与中山狼 (*Dōngguō Xiānshēng yǔ Zhòngshān Láng*).
- [133](#) Jackson and Hugus, *Ladder to the Clouds*, p. [175](#).
- [134](#) Derk Bodde and Clarence Morris, *Law in Imperial China, Exemplified by 190 Ch'ing Dynasty Cases: Translated from the Hsiang-an hui-lan, with Historical, Social and Judicial Commentaries*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967, pp. xiv–xvii, 559–60.
- [135](#) Zhū Yuánzhāng was said to have been a very unattractive person. He was originally of peasant stock and was quite ugly in appearance. “The Ming family name, *Zhū*, was a homophone for the word pig [*zhū* 猪], reinforcing popular references to his porcine appearance.” Paludan, *Chronicles of the Chinese Emperors*, p. [162](#).

PART II

# MORTALS AND RELIGIOUS BEINGS



Fig. 352 This seated alabaster Buddha exhibits the traditional signs by which all Buddhas are identified – elongated ears, a protuberance on the top of his head (known as an *usnisa*), and a raised dot or mole on his forehead (known as an *urna*). The short tight curls of hair on his head are not visible in this rendition, but he sits in one of the classic positions of a Buddha. His round, delicately featured face with painted eyes, lips, and eyebrows, together with the ruffled flap of his monk's robe, identify it as Burmese.



## Chapter 7

# CHILDREN

Most of the generic young children found in contemporary Chinese art are associated with the Chinese New Year (see Fig. [65](#)). They appear standing, crawling, or sitting, holding or riding carp, *qílín*, or toads, and holding peaches, oranges, flowering fruit tree branches, and the other many symbols of riches and good fortune of the New Year. To interpret these pictures, you need only know the symbolic significance of each item – peaches a desire for longevity, carps affluence, magpies good tidings to come, etc. Traditionally, these generic New Year babies were male, reflecting the emphasis placed on male descendants in traditional Chinese society, but modern posters and pictures now include girls. Typically, both sexes wear the traditional *dōudu* (兜肚, the bib-like undergarment that covered a baby's or toddler's chest and abdomen); all these children, regardless of gender, are plump to reflect prosperity.

There are a few representations of children, however, which are not generic, but have historical, moral, mythological, and/or religious roots. One of the best-known sources is the book known as the *Twenty-four Filial Exemplars* (*Èrshísìxiào* 二十四孝), which contains twenty-four stories of the utter devotion of children to their parents. The stories are familiar to all Chinese children brought up in households that still honor the traditions of the past, and scenes from these tales became very popular as tomb decorations, especially during the twelfth century when the tales were being codified.<sup>1</sup> Only one of the better known tales is included below, but if you find a scene that includes a mature child or young adult with an adult or adults, there is a good chance that it has been inspired by this famous text.<sup>2</sup>

The following entries have been arranged according to the number of children illustrated, from a solitary child up to the grouping known as “100 Children.”

## BOY RIDING AN OX

One of the most popular figures in China is a simple painted clay statue of a youth known as Herd Boy Riding an Ox, who is the lover of the Weaving Maiden, a “star goddess.” They are also known as Cowherd or Oxherd (Niúláng 牛郎) and Spinning Maiden or Girl Weaver (Zhīnǚ 织女, see p. [207](#)). Sadly, the gods frowned upon love affairs between mortals and immortals, so they were separated, and only allowed to reunite once a year on the seventh day of the seventh month (on the date known as *qīxī*, 七夕), crossing the river (the Milky Way) that separates them on a “heavenly” bridge made of magpies, symbols of marriage and happiness (see magpie p. [77](#)). Their annual reunion is a popular folk art motif but has also appeared on festival badges. Some scholars understand this story to be one of “negative capability, failure and uselessness. For although the weaver weaves, she never finishes her cloth, and although the ox is a powerful draught animal, it is not yoked to a carriage,”<sup>3</sup> but this is a rather glum interpretation of this romantic tragedy. Their union resulted in two children (twins) who are sometimes shown in the arms of the cowherd.

The seventh day of the seventh month is also the traditional date when women prayed to heaven hoping to improve their needlework skills, which has resulted in a number of tapestries, embroideries, and other pictorial media combining the two motifs. There exists, for example, in the Liaoning Provincial Museum, a very simple but lovely Ming Dynasty tapestry showing women taking up their needlework while gazing up towards the heavens where the herd boy can be seen riding an ox amongst the clouds.<sup>4</sup>

## **OLDER MALE CHILD (OR ADOLESCENT) DIGGING FOR BAMBOO ROOTS IN THE SNOW.**

A solitary young male digging for bamboo roots in the snow is **Mèng Zōng** (孟宗), a famous filial son in the Three Kingdoms Period (220–65), whose warm tears melted frozen snow as he dug fruitlessly in search of fresh bamboo shoots for his ill mother (Fig. [354](#)). At seeing such filial behavior, the gods sent new shoots, which he carefully gathered and took home, curing his mother’s illness. This is a popular tale known as “Mèng Zōng Moved Heaven,” one of the twenty-four filial exemplars so identified from the text of the same title (see above), used to instruct children in the byways of proper behavior of children towards their parents. While many of the illustrations associated with these moral tales are popular motifs, this is one of the best known.

Fig. 353 A variant of the 100 Children theme, this time set in the courtyard of a traditional dwelling surrounded by interesting rocks and pine trees, representing that most prized and ultimate blessing – an abundance of male descendants to ensure continuation of the family line and the performance of filial duties. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.



Fig. 354 A famous Japanese woodblock print of the filial son Mèng Zōng hurrying home to his mother through the snow with his freshly dug-up bamboo shoots. Artist Hokusai.

## BOY STANDING ON ONE FOOT

A single boy standing one-legged on the head of a fish holding a brush in one hand (and sometimes a scholar's cap in the other) is the God of Examinations, **Kuixīng** (魁星), also associated with Wénchāng (文昌), the God of Literature. As Kuixīng he is usually portrayed as described above (for the relationship between fish and scholarship, see fish p. [96](#); see also writing instruments p. [264](#)), sometimes as a child and sometimes as a fairly unattractive man with horns on his head, which symbolize the sprouting buds of a carp's horns ready to change into those of a dragon (see carp p. [93](#)). Children in the pose of Kuixīng (balanced on one foot, holding a brush) are meant to be emulating his prowess (and foreshadowing future academic success). The pen or calligraphy brush (*bǐ* 笔) signals the certainty of examination success as it plays on a pun; another *bì* (必) means “surely, must, will certainly.” He can also appear as a mature adult male

(see p. [161](#)). His name, Kuíxīng, identifies his legendary home, the constellation Ursa Major, known in Chinese as Kui (魁); *xīng* (星) means “star.”<sup>5</sup>

### BOY WITH FLAMING WHEEL FEET

A single princely young boy typically clad in red silk trousers with flaming wheel feet and a sword in his hand is the mythical immortal **Nézhā** (哪吒), popularly known as the Third Prince (Sāntàizi 三太子) as he was his parents’ third son (Fig. [355](#)). During the time of the Jade Emperor, he descended from heaven and performed many good deeds, but was also unfortunately responsible for killing one of the Dragon King’s sons. As a result, he had to put himself to death to keep his parents from being punished for his bad behavior – an excellent example of the filial piety expected from all children in a Confucian China. He was later “recreated” from water lily stalks and lotus leaves, given “wind-and-fire” wheels for under his feet, and armed with a fiery sword. His powers enable him to protect altars, which is why he often is found alongside other deities on family or temple altars (Fig. [356](#)).

### PAIR OF CHILDREN WITH A RABBIT

A pair of children holding a rabbit in a lady’s boudoir are the children of the Goddess of the Moon (see p. [206](#)).

### PAIR OF YOUNG BOYS HOLDING A LOTUS AND BOX

Two young boys known as **Hé Hé Èr Xiān** (和合二仙), literally, “the two spirits of Harmony and Union,” figure as prominent harbingers of fortune in Chinese New Year art (Figs. [357](#), [358](#)). These two rolypoly figures (reflecting prosperity) hold respectively a lotus (*hé* 荷) and a small box (*hé* 盒), to give us the double rebus of “harmony (*hé* 和) and union (*hé* 合).”

Legend has it that the two figures were inspired by the famous Tang Dynasty (618–906) hermit monks (Fig. [359](#)), the poet Hán Shān (寒山), which means “cold mountain” (identified by his usually holding a scroll), and his companion Shí Dé (拾得), which means “foundling” (he holds a broom).<sup>7</sup> Both were associated with the school of Buddhism known as Chan (known later, in Japan, as Zen).<sup>8</sup> During

the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368–1911), their image was popularized into that of the two little boys found today.



Fig. 355 Nézah as a young prince, sword in hand, with flaming wheel feet. Although descended from heaven, he was responsible for killing one of the Dragon King's sons. Drawing courtesy of Sonja Bjaaland.



Fig. 356 A beautiful antique statue of Nézah that portrays him as a young boy still wearing a “belly protector” or *dōudu*. His left foot rests on the flaming wheel. Courtesy of David Mun, Tiepolo Gallery,



Singapore.



Fig. 357 A small ivory carving depicting the two brothers known as Hé Hé that would have been either kept in a small pouch or sewn onto a child's hat. Note the lotus (*hé*) and the small box (*hé*) that are the homophones of their names, "the two spirits of Harmony and Union."



Fig. 358 A beautiful Dehua (*blanc de chine*) figurine of Hé Hé. © Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore. Gift of Frank and Pamela Hickley.



Fig. 359 A contemporary scroll depicting the two Tang Dynasty hermit monks, Hán Shān and Shí Dé, who inspired the evolution of the Hé Hé brothers. Their names appear on the upper right of the scroll. Courtesy of Eileen Deeley.

They are often shown carrying or surrounded by coins, gourds, and fungus, and other common symbols of wealth, longevity, and success. They sometimes

hold a toy Precious Horse bearing valuables or a Coin Dragon (a dragon made of coins that have been strung together). A bat may peek mischievously from the box or have fully emerged to emphasize the idea of “blessings.” In the context of Chinese New Year, it is understood that they are bringing a wealth of blessings, including harmony and union, into the New Year. Sometimes they are depicted with a God of Wealth. Thus, a painting or scroll of three boys playing together with a toad depicts the two with Liú Hǎi (see p. [163](#)).

Because of their association with “harmony and union,” they are also regarded as the patron saints of marriage, so if you spot a “double happiness” (*shuāngxǐ* 囍) in the picture, it is a wedding decoration.

## FOUR MALE CHILDREN FORMING A SQUARE

An interesting configuration of four boys forming a square (four bodies but only two heads and sets of arms and legs so the figures are interconnected) represents the Four Blessings of happiness, high official position, longevity, and good luck. The Sir Joseph Hotung Collection in the British Museum contains a beautiful jade example of such a *sìxǐrén* (四喜人, “four happy people”) that dates back to the seventeenth to eighteenth century.<sup>[9](#)</sup>

## FIVE MALE CHILDREN

A group of five male children (usually portrayed as two to five year olds wearing the traditional *dōudu* (兜肚) belly protector, but sometimes as older school-age children holding books) symbolizes the accumulated advantages many sons will bring a family. The modern representation probably evolved from an older motif of five children holding hands, representing the five directions, known as *wǔ dào wá wá* (五道娃娃), literally “five-way children.”<sup>[10](#)</sup> This motif is still found amongst the traditional papercuts in Gansu Province.



Fig. 360 Four young boys play chess in a banana leaf, peony, and longevity rock-strewn garden while others amuse themselves at other games, in a motif popularly known as “welcoming sons” (*zhàozi*). Note the *ruyi* border at the bowl’s base. Wanli Period. Courtesy of Sotheby’s.

## YOUNG BOYS PLAYING

Young boys playing or seated in a garden represents the theme of “welcoming sons” (*zhàozi* 召子), especially, we are told, when there is a plantain tree (*bājiāo*, 色蕉) present (Fig. [360](#)). Banana plants are popular ornamentals in Chinese gardens. They were originally “planted in central China not later than the early part of the third century ad” and grown for both their fiber and fruits.<sup>[11](#)</sup> They (together with other broad-leaved plants) were especially prized because of their association with the literati class, who were said to love the sound the leaves made when a small breeze rustled them or a gentle rain fell on them. One popular legend even has a poor young scholar practicing his calligraphy on the large leaves when he could no longer afford paper. As a result, plantain leaves figure frequently in Chinese art, especially as border designs. We are told that this motif was particularly popular from the Song Dynasty onwards.<sup>[12](#)</sup>

## YOUNG BOYS WITH A BROKEN WATER JAR

A less common but very interesting motif centers around a group of young boys with a large broken water jar. This depicts a story from the childhood of the famous eleventh-century (1019–86) statesman and scholar Sīmǎ Guāng (司马光), who saved a young companion from drowning by having the good sense to smash the large jar his playmate had fallen into with a stone so the water could

run out. “The scene of the boys and the broken jar was popular as decoration on late Ming ceramics and lacquer (also in Japanese works of art such as netsuke and tsuba, where the hero is known as Shiba Onko), but it is more rarely found as a design element in a Ch’ing work of art.”<sup>13</sup>



Fig. 361 Little boys carry toys and lanterns and, most importantly, a box of precious objects on this bright yellow glazed vase with the 100 Children motif. You can just see the branching coral peeking out from behind the mound of golden ingots. Orange *rúyì*, lotus, and cloud borders at the rim, neck, and shoulder of the vase, with a stylized lotus petal design and key fret pattern of rectangular spirals around the foot. Sighted in a Shanghai department store.

## 100 CHILDREN

One of the most common motifs found on screens, ceramics, and other brightly colored ornaments and textiles is that of 100 Children or 100 Boys (*bǎizǐ* 百子), said to represent the sons of the founder of the Zhou Dynasty (1027–256 BCE), Zhōu Wénwáng (周文王) (Figs. [353](#), [361](#), [362](#)). He was blessed with 99 sons from his 24 wives, and adopted an orphaned baby boy to make an even hundred.

“Children appear in Chinese art in many contexts, often serving didactic functions as paragons of Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist virtue, as embodiments of adult aspirations and as amuletic images that articulate adult concerns regarding prosperity, longevity, status and well being.”<sup>14</sup> Engaged in sports and contests, wrestling and running, bearing fruit and auspicious objects, most often in a garden setting, they represent that most prized and ultimate blessing: an abundance of male descendants to ensure continuation of the family line and the performance of filial duties. The 100 Children motif “first appeared on painting during the Song dynasty (960–1279) and continued to be found on porcelain in



the 16th and 17th centuries.”<sup>15</sup> The design became so popular that it was “included in a seventeenth century manual of embroidery designs.”<sup>16</sup> Look carefully and you will be able to identify many of the auspicious objects and groupings described in this text, placed alongside or in the hands and arms of the playing boys. Almost invariably there is one child holding a branch of *cassia* (*guìpí* 桂皮) or *osmanthus* (*guìhuā*, 桂花), signifying the passing of the civil service examinations and hence professional success. In this respect, the Chinese would not have differed from any other parents wishing for publicly recognized and successful offspring.



Fig. 362 This classic advertising poster has used as its motif the traditional pattern of 100 Children to amuse potential customers. Courtesy of Antiques of the Orient Pte Ltd (Singapore).

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The Victoria & Albert Museum in London has some nice examples in marble excavated from a tomb dating to the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234). The Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore also has such a scene from a funerary stele from the Six Dynasties Period (220–589). Similar pieces exist in both the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, and the Minneapolis Institute of Art in Minnesota, USA, to name just a few such examples in museum collections.

- <sup>2</sup> Several of the “filial children” described in the tales are adult children, or their age is not clear, which has inspired a wide variety of interpretations in how the “children” have been depicted in Chinese art. The example in this chapter shows a young man as opposed to a young boy.
- <sup>3</sup> Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction*, Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, p. [166](#).
- <sup>4</sup> *Heavens’ Embroidered Cloths: One Thousand Years of Chinese Textiles*, Hong Kong: The Urban Council of Hong Kong, 1995, pp. 328–9.
- <sup>5</sup> The seven principal stars in Ursa Major form the Big Dipper. These are the original seven stars that used to appear on the emperor’s robe as one of the Twelve Symbols of Imperial Authority.
- <sup>6</sup> See, for example, Sotheby’s, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, auction catalogue, March 23, 2004, lot #273, p. [114](#).
- <sup>7</sup> <http://www.dabase.net/madmonks.htm>
- <sup>8</sup> A charming Japanese scroll depicting the two monks (known in Japanese as Kanzan and Jittoku), painted by Nagasawa Rosetsu (1754–99), can be seen in Sydney’s Art Gallery of New South Wales.
- <sup>9</sup> Jessica Rawson, *Chinese Jade: From the Neolithic to the Qing*, London: British Museum Press, 1995, p. 379.
- <sup>10</sup> It is also sometimes referred to as *lášŏuwáwá* (拉手娃娃), literally “hand-in-hand children.” See Yang Xianrang and Yang Yang, *Chinese Folk Art*, Beijing: New World Press, 2000, pp. [19](#), [26](#).
- <sup>11</sup> Peter Valder, *The Garden Plants of China*, Rozelle, New South Wales: Florilegium, 1999, p. 308.
- <sup>12</sup> Sotheby’s, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, p. [27](#).
- <sup>13</sup> Paul Moss, *Between Heaven and Earth: Secular and Divine Figural Images in Chinese Paintings and Objects*, London: Sydney L. Moss, 1988, Fig. [34](#).
- <sup>14</sup> From a description of an academic forum on “Childhood in Chinese Art and Society.” <http://www.aasianst.org/absts/1995abst/china/csess5.htm>.
- <sup>15</sup> Julia B. Curtis, “Tales Told in Porcelain: Jingdezhen Blue-and-White Wares at the San Antonio Museum of Art,” *Orientations*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2005, p. [46](#).
- <sup>16</sup> Claudia Brown, *Weaving’s China’s Past: The Amy S. Clague Collection of Chinese Textiles*, exhibition catalogue, Phoenix, Arizona: Phoenix Art Museum, 2000, p. [142](#).



Fig. 363 The God of Wealth in court robes and cap surrounded by gold ingots, peonies, peaches, and pomegranates, carrying a scroll that reads *shēngcái yǒu dào*, meaning “knowing how to make money.”

## Chapter 8

# SINGLE MALE FIGURES

A peach is a peach is a peach, but who are all these individual adult male figures seen painted on Chinese porcelain and scrolls, or found as statues in Chinatowns and Chinese markets and shrines around the world? To identify them, you will need to take note of their age and status, which can be discerned by studying their personal appearance and clothing, and especially the details of their accessories, attributes, garments, and companions. For example, young men appear clean-shaven, middle-age men are often shown with moustaches (men usually did not grow moustaches until the age of forty), and old men typically have both a moustache and a beard (beards were not grown until one had celebrated one's sixtieth birthday).

The status of a member of the imperial court was discerned by both the color of his robes and his rank badge that identified him as either a military or civil official, together with his specific rank. Seasonal changes dictated that men's summer court hats were conical and usually woven from cane and straw; winter hats were usually made of fur-trimmed dark-colored satin.

Do not let dress deceive you. An individual or group of unkempt individuals reclining around a wine jar in a Chinese painting is not a Chinese romanticism of tramps. "Geniuses [and Immortals] are often depicted in Chinese paintings wearing tattered and torn clothing, with dishevelled hair and an unkempt appearance. Clothes do not make a man, and appearances can be deceptive. That is the philosophy behind the painting of a genius."<sup>1</sup>

The season of a picture can be determined not only by court dress but also the flowers shown, the ornamental trimmings, and even the shape of the teacups on the table (the cups without stems, Fig. [364](#)); cups with stems were only used for alcoholic beverages in China although these could also be drunk from stemless cups).<sup>2</sup> If the edges curve out, it is summer, if straight to retain the heat, winter. Because this is a topic in and of itself, the study of Chinese dress and ornaments can be especially rewarding.<sup>3</sup> As a result, look for the distinguishing characteristics and accessories that identify the scene or the individual. The following single male figures (group compositions follow separately) are arranged in an approximate hierarchy of likelihood encountered.





Fig. 364 Two stemless jade cups for drinking either tea or rice wine. The cup on the left with a straight rim is intended for winter use, the cup on the right with a slightly flaring rim for summer use.

## GOD OF LONGEVITY

An elderly, portly male with a uniquely large cranium and long ears, typically holding a perfect peach, is one of the easiest and most important figures to identify in Chinese art. He is the Daoist God of Longevity, **Lǎo Shòuxīng** (老寿星), or just **Shòuxīng** (寿星) (Fig. [365](#)). He is so popular and thus so frequently portrayed that few will be unfamiliar with this gentle immortal with his vast, prominent cranium,<sup>4</sup> big ears, and long drooping eyebrows (a sign of great age). He commonly holds a giant peach of immortality in his right hand and a walking stick with attached gourd (holding special life-giving elixirs) in his left. He is often accompanied by other symbols of immortality, such as a crane or spotted deer, with pines and cypress or other evergreens in the background. Sometimes he is accompanied by a young boy symbolizing youth, who may hold a peach for longevity; all these images conjure up wishes for the viewer's or beneficiary's longevity. Lǎo Shòuxīng's image is thus a popular birthday motif. He is frequently found as one of the three supernatural beings shown together in paintings (or more commonly as ceramic, ivory, wood, or plasticene figures) known jointly as Fú Lù Shòu (福禄寿), consisting of the Gods of Good Fortune and Blessings (Fúxīng), Rank and Emolument (Lùxīng), and Longevity (Shòuxīng), found in most Chinese homes to ensure a family's general well-being (Fig. [365](#)). (To identify a younger, slimmer, single man holding a peach and fleeing, see DōNGFāNG SHUò p. [164](#)).





**Fig. 365 Figures of the three deities Fú Lù Shòu for sale in a Chinese New Year night bazaar. Each holds a scroll bearing his name even though they are easily identifiable without these: Fú holds small children in his arms, Lù carries the insignia of official status, while Shòu is noteworthy for his dominant skull. Their positioning is also fixed in the order Fú Lù Shòu.**



**Fig. 366 Gently tugging his long beard, the Daoist god and folk hero of the period known as the Three Kingdoms, Guāndi, stands ready for any battle. The fierce slant of his eyes is a sign of his bravery. Contemporary wood carving. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.**



Fig. 367 Three red bats (*fú*) surround two traditional Chinese coins, representing the riches that come with official position (*lù*). At the bottom is a cluster of peaches, representing longevity (*shòu*). Together they form the components *fúlùshòu*. Pressed glass snuff bottle.

## GOD OF RANK AND EMOLUMENT

A distinguished older male dressed as a court official with a wide jade belt and holding a narrow tablet or scepter is **Lùxīng** (禄星), the God of Rank and Emolument (Fig. [365](#)). He is always dressed in an official's robes and holds an identifying narrow tablet (known as a *hù* 绮, but sometimes erroneously referred to as a tally, *fú* 符)<sup>5</sup> or *rúyì* scepter (see p. [256](#)), as these are signs of his role as a state official, which have secured for him his rank and steady income. If a candidate was fortunate enough in Imperial China to pass the official examinations that were the pathway to officialdom, a sinecure was virtually forthcoming, guaranteeing one a comfortable state in life. For this reason, he is sometimes referred to as a God of Wealth. Lùxīng is often accompanied by a deer (*lù* 鹿), a homophonous relationship with the *lù* (禄) of his name.

## GOD OF GOOD FORTUNE AND BLESSINGS

An older male holding a young male child in his arms is **Fúxīng** (福星), the God of Good Fortune and Blessings, the last of the three popular Daoist “star gods” (Fú Lù Shòu), *xīng* (星) meaning “star” (Fig. [365](#)). He typically carries a little boy

(or several male children) in his arms, as male heirs are the greatest of all blessings in traditional Chinese society (and, apparently, to some modern Chinese as well). A bat (*fú* 蝠) often either hovers overhead or rests on a shoulder or knee to emphasize the imagery, as a bat is a popular rebus for “good fortune, happiness” (*fú* 福) (Fig. [367](#)).



Fig. 368 Beard in left hand, sword in right, eyes fiercely slanted, this popular folk hero, Guāndì, is easily identified once you know the telltale signs. He is also known as Guān Yǔ. One of the eight Chinese Legendary Hero statues in Singapore’s Marina City Park donated by Tee Yih Jia Food Manufacturing Pte Ltd.

## GOD OF WAR

A mature, muscular male in full military uniform standing, seated (sometimes reading), or on horseback is the Daoist God of War **Guāndì** (关帝), also known as **Guāngōng** (關公) (Fig. [366](#)), who together with **Zhāng Fēi** (张飞), **Zhào Yún** (赵云), **Mǎ Chāo** (马超), and **Huáng Zhōng** (黄忠) comprise the famous group known as the Five Tiger Generals (see TIGER p. [145](#)). Although he began life as the bean curd vendor Guān Yǔ (关云长), his fame is the result of the role he played as one of the three famous “brother warriors” (together with Liú Bèi and Zhāng Fēi),<sup>6</sup> who became sworn blood brothers during the period of the Three Kingdoms (220–65). He underwent hagiographic transformation during the

Song Dynasty (960–1279) and became a guardian of the Daoist faith, winning his title God of War during the late Ming Dynasty (1368–1644).<sup>7</sup> As the God of War, he stands against evil and is the ultimate symbol for justice, honesty, and integrity. Thus you will find his statue in shrines, temples, homes, and even police stations. Two attendants, a standard bearer (Zhōu Cāng 周) and Guāndì's adopted son (Guān Píng, 关平), are often by his side.

As a martial figure he is usually shown wearing military clothing with a tiger's face emblazoned on his chest (sometimes covered by a court gown), with a headdress and brandishing a sword, often mounted on a stallion. He is typically portrayed with a good-sized moustache and beard, and the fierce slant of his eyes is a sign of his bravery (Fig. [368](#)).



Fig. 369 The God of Literature in a form known as Kuíxing stands on the head of a large fish (usually a carp) with one foot raised in the air, holding a calligraphy brush or scholar's cap. He is also known as the God of Examinations. Ming Dynasty bronze statue. Courtesy of Jan van Beers Oriental Art, London.

He can also be found in a more benign yet stately pose, seated, reading the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chūnqiū* 春秋, one of the five Confucian classics). Because of this visible love of the classics, Guāndì is also the honorary patron of literature.

Guāndì is also at times referred to as a God of Wealth because of the peace that he ensures, which usually brings economic well-being, and is commonly



offered tribute and prayers in this capacity. During the Qing Dynasty, it is said that nearly every town in China had its own Guāndì Temple.<sup>8</sup> Many remain today and are still popular destinations.

## GOD OF EXAMINATIONS

An ugly male with short, protruding horns, standing on the head of a large fish, usually a carp, is the God of Examinations (Fig. [369](#)). In this form, he is known as **Kuixīng** (魁星). One foot is generally raised in the air, and he typically holds a calligraphy brush (or a scholar's cap). The age of the young man varies from that of a youth (see BOY STANDING ON ONE FOOT p. [154](#)) to a fully mature adult male, the latter perhaps reflecting the aspirations of even older candidates in passing China's now-extinct civil service examinations. There are two explanations given for this god's unusual position poised on the head of a fish. The first relates to the expression "standing alone on the head of a turtle" (*dúzhàn áotóu* 独占鳌头), which is a colloquial expression meaning that someone has come out first, or top of their class. Traditionally, the top three scholars in the imperial examinations were presented to the emperor, and the top candidate stood on a step in the imperial courtyard that also held the statue of a mythical turtle (*áo* 鳌), also at times identified as a tortoise. Visitors can still see these statues in the Forbidden City in Beijing (see Fig. [208](#)). The second explanation draws on the parable of the successful carp, which fighting its way upstream eventually turns into a dragon on reaching the Dragon Gate cataract. This image or metaphor is popularly used as an analogy for the work and effort required by young scholars in reaching their academic goals (see CARP p. [97](#)).



Fig. 370 Detail from a Tang tomb of an official holding a *hù* (a narrow tablet held by officials when received in audience by the emperor).

The God of Examinations is often confused with the God of Literature, Wénchāng (文昌),<sup>9</sup> who is also usually seated (Fig. [372](#)).

## GOD OF WEALTH

Several deities are associated with wealth and even at times identified as a god of wealth, but the name **Cái Shén** (财丰申) designates *the* God of Wealth, who is an honored deity in many Chinese homes (Fig. [363](#)). His popularity is unchallenged throughout the Chinese world and many traditional Chinese homes and shops have one or more of his images to ensure his presence. Wealth is always seen as the result of power or academic success and position. Thus, the popular God of Rank and Emolument (see p. [160](#)) and God of War (see p. [161](#)) are the prototypes of the God of Wealth. It is important to look at a picture's details to correctly identify the main figure. The clues to look for are symbols of wealth and prosperity (coins, ancient silver and gold ingots, pieces of jade, coral branches, etc.). For example, when a male figure is in military dress and headgear but is holding a branch of coral, the coral tells us that we are viewing a God of Wealth. When a figure appears in mandarin robes and cap with appropriate drooping moustache and long goatee, but is surrounded by gold and silver ingots

(pieces of metal that resemble giant Chinese dumplings, see p. 251) rather than holding the official tablets of a court official, we know once again that we are viewing a God of Wealth (Fig. 373). The concept of wealth is so potent that sometimes the word alone (*cái* 财) is found on a home altar to represent *Cái Shén*.



Fig. 371 Paste this paper charm outside your door to protect it from fire. The characters read (from top to bottom) *huǒ bù zhī shén*, which means God of Fire. Paper charm purchased in a rural market in Yunnan.



Fig. 372 Wénchāng, the God of Literature, holding a *rúyì* scepter in his right hand and wearing the robes of a civil official. Early seventeenth century with an incised square mark of the potter, He Chaozong. Height 34 cm. © Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore. Gift of Frank and Pamela Hickley.



Fig. 373 The God of Wealth, Cǎi Shén, in military dress, sword in his right hand raised over his head and a stack of gold ingots representing wealth in his left. Note the tiger face on his robe. Poster on a door in Lijiang, Yunnan.

Numerous scrolls consisting purely of expressions of wealth and success

abound in popular Chinese art, particularly during Chinese New Year, often decorated with Cǎi Shén's likeness.<sup>[10](#)</sup>

## GOD OF FIRE

A male with a red face carrying a flaming wheel or ball is the God of Fire (Fig. [371](#)). He is known under several names, including **Zhù Róng** (祝融) and **Huǒ Shén** (火神). Apart from his red face, at times he has a third eye in the middle of his forehead, and he often carries a wheel of fire or ball. He is the father of a flood demon (Gòng Gōng 共工), whom he ultimately conquered. Because he is also associated with the direction south and the southern hemisphere (remember that red is the color associated with the direction south), some of his names reflect that role (for example, Nánfāngjūn 南方君, “lord of the southern quarters”). His image can still be found on crude paper slips pasted on dwelling doors to ward off house fires in parts of rural China.

## YOUNG MALE WITH A TOAD

A youthful male accompanied by, holding, or playing with a toad is **Liú Hǎi** (刘海) (Fig. [375](#)). There are many variations of how this tenth-century civil servant left his post, appearing hundreds of years later as an Immortal with a magic three-legged toad lured from a well with a string of coins. Liú Hǎi is also depicted dancing with a string of coins he has collected from his toad (see TOAD p. [104](#)), which has the ability to spit out gold and silver coins. Sometimes he is shown with the toad tied to his side with a rope or bound to his back. Hence, Liú Hǎi and his toad, or the toad with a coin in its mouth, have become associated with the acquisition of wealth and make a frequent appearance on New Year scrolls and paintings. Their image is also reproduced on coin-shaped metal charms (see Fig. [203](#)), which when carried in the owner's pocket will hopefully stimulate the flow of money.<sup>[11](#)</sup> While many paintings of Liú Hǎi belong to the genre of Chinese New Year or folk art, the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington DC has a particularly fine fifteenth-century Ming Dynasty (ink and color) silk scroll of Liú Hǎi holding his toad (Fig. [376](#)).<sup>[12](#)</sup> Liú Hǎi with his toad is also a popular subject for small decorative sculptures made of wood, resin, bronze, etc.



## MUSCULAR MALE WITH A BAT

A mature, muscular adult male with a bat is **Zhōng Kuí** (金中) or **Tiān Guān** (天官), popularly known as the Demon Chaser (Fig. 374). Zhōng Kuí is a much loved and hence commonly found figure in Chinese art, easily identified by his ferocious appearance (bushy black beard and moustache) and sword, which he brandishes while balanced on one foot. Sometimes he is depicted wearing a wreath of peach blossoms, believed to have the power to repel evil. The final clue is the bat circling above his head or resting on his shoulder, an embellishment in place from at least the fifteenth century.<sup>13</sup> This is the image painted of Zhōng Kuí by the famous artist Wú Dàozi (吴道子),<sup>14</sup> as described by the Tang Emperor Xuánzōng (玄宗, r. 712–56) who saw him in a dream.<sup>15</sup> It established the model for all subsequent depictions. Zhōng Kuí has also been depicted riding on a spotted deer, a very unusual combination, but the telltale bat flying in the air over his shoulder clearly establishes the rider's identity.<sup>16</sup>



Fig. 374 Zhōng Kuí, also known as the Demon Chaser, is readily identified by his fierce appearance, the sword in his hand, and, above all, the bat circling over his shoulder or head. Drawing courtesy of Sonja Bjaaland.



Fig. 375 Liú Hǎi with a string of cash (coins) and his toad. Courtesy of Eileen Deeley.



Fig. 376 Ming Dynasty fifteenth-century (ink and color) silk scroll of Liú H ǎi and his toad. Courtesy of Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1914.78



Fig. 377 Another variant of Zhōng Kuí, this one wearing military dress. Because he is credited with the ability to defeat ghosts and demons, pictures of him are especially popular on that most dangerous day of the Chinese lunar calendar, the fifth day of the fifth month, the summer solstice. Drawing courtesy of Clinton Phillips.

Zhōng Kuí was a fictitious scholar who was wrongly deprived of the honor of passing the civil service exams; as a result, he committed suicide on the steps of the imperial palace. He was, however, posthumously restored to his rightful position, labeled the Demon Chaser, and given the status of “judge” as a reward for returning to the world to save the Emperor Xuánzōng from the evil spirits and ghosts that were tormenting the emperor’s sleep (Fig. 377). There is a carving of him as a judge (*pànguān* 判官) dressed in a red robe holding a tablet (*hù* 綺) of the type held before the chest by officials when in audience with the emperor that dates back to 1852. The inscription reads *Zhōngnán yǎng fú* (鍾南仰福) or “[the Scholar of Mount] Zhōngnán looks up towards happiness.”<sup>17</sup> The judge’s robe adds an additional layer of meaning as *pàn* sounds like both “judge” (判) and “expectation” (盼). The red robe is both auspicious and adds the concept of vastness (see p. 221). Hence, we can say that Zhōng Kuí has very high expectations of happiness.

Because Zhōng Kuí’s popularity comes from his ability to defeat ghosts and demons, his image is especially loved on the fifth day of the fifth month of the Chinese lunar calendar (the “most dangerous day of the year when light will now

begin to give way to darkness”),<sup>18</sup> and at the end of the year. Formerly, Zhōng Kuí’s name alone, painted as a charm over a home’s entranceway, was sufficient to protect the inhabitants.

The bat circling above his head is generally regarded as another manifestation of the expression “bats descend from the sky” (*fúzi tiānlái* 蝠子天来), which is a rebus for “happiness descends from heaven” (*fúzi tiānlái* 福子天来).

Another male figure sometimes shown with a hovering bat is the Deity of Heaven, **Tiān Guān** (天官). He is usually shown standing, dressed in court robes, holding a scroll that reads “Tian Guan bestows good fortune” (*Tiān Guān cì fú* 天官赐福). The bat (*fú* 蝠), when shown, emphasizes his bringing of good fortune (*fú* 福) to the family. He is one of three Daoist deities known as the Three Official Divinities or *sānguānshén* (三关字申), together with the Deities of Earth (Dì Guān 地官) and Water (Shuǐ Guān 水官). Tiān Guān was recognized as the bestower of good fortune, who came to earth on the day of the Lantern Festival (the fifteenth day of the first lunar month after Chinese New Year). Unlike Zhōng Kuí, he never carries a sword and both his feet are firmly on the ground.

## MALE WITH A BOW AND ARROWS.

A single male with a bow and arrows is **Hòu Yì** (后羿), sometimes referred to as just Yì (or as Humane Yì [Rén Yì 仁羿] for his role in saving all living creatures from certain death), but more popularly known in Chinese folklore as The Archer. Commissioned to shoot down the ten suns that were scorching the earth (in art, sometimes portrayed as suns and sometimes as ravens), he continued shooting until only one sun was left, stopping in time to save the world from eternal darkness and gloom. As a reward, the gods presented him with a flask of the elixir of life, which his wife Cháng’ér stole and ran away with to the moon, where she still resides according to popular folklore. Hòu Yì is usually depicted with a drawn bow aimed at one of the extraneous suns (or a raven), but is believed to reside on the surviving sun, separated from his moon-dwelling wife. (See RAVEN p. 85, CHÁNG’É p. 206, and SUN p. 260.)

## MALE FLEEING WITH A PEACH



A single male fleeing a scene, peach in hand, is **Dōngfāng Shuò** (東方朔), who is remembered as the man who lived to be 18,000 years old after stealing the peaches of immortality from Xī Wángmǔ's garden (see pp. [203–4](#)). He is usually seen fleeing with his stolen fruit, glancing back over his shoulder, with his robe billowing in his wake.

### MALE DRESSED IN JUDGE'S ROBES SEATED ON A THRONE

This is **Zàoshén** (灶神), the Kitchen God, whose picture used to hang in all Chinese kitchens (Fig. [378](#)). A benign-looking figure dressed in judge's robes, the Kitchen God (also known as Zào Jūn 灶君 or Zào Wáng Yé 灶王爷) reported the family's conduct to Shàng Dì (上帝), the Supreme Ruler, on the twenty-third day of the twelfth lunar month of each year, a day when all members of the family would attempt to “bribe” him by smearing honey or sweets on his lips (Fig. [379](#)). His picture was then taken down and burnt in the family stove. After the New Year celebrations, a new picture would be put up. Today, his picture is still sold throughout the Chinese world for the Lunar New Year festivities. He is sometimes shown with his wife and/or extended family by his side.

### MALE WITH A LONG BLACK BEARD BEARING TWO AXES.

**Lǐ Kuí** (李逵), also known as the Black Whirlwind or the Iron Ox, is one of the central characters of the epic novel *Water Margin* (*Shuǐhǔ Zhuàn* 水滸傳).<sup>19</sup> As a “dark-skinned” prison guard, he helped rescue the central figure of the novel, the quasi-historical leader of the outlaws, Sòng Jiāng (宋江), from public execution. He then joins the Water Margin outlaws, and although a savage fighter (hence his nicknames) who often has to be reprimanded for his violence, he is fiercely loyal to his companions and the under-privileged. As such, he is one of China's most loved folk heroes.

### MALE HOLDING A PIECE OF WOOD OR A BIRDCAGE

**Lǚ Bān** (鲁班), the patron (“God”) of Chinese carpenters and builders, is respected for his industriousness and ingenuity. Representations show him studying a piece of wood or forming a miniature birdcage, the means by which

he solved one of the most demanding challenges put to him during his life. His hair is usually done up in a topknot and he has a carefully trimmed moustache and beard, probably to keep them clear of his building tools. His symbol is the axe. Lǚ Bān was believed to have lived in the State of Chu during the transitional period between the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BCE) and the Warring States Period (481–221 BCE) and is also associated with the development of various forms of weaponry, such as scaling ladders. He is acknowledged as a famous architect of his time, but unfortunately there are no extant buildings showing his skills, although local legends attribute him with being instrumental in the building of the ancient cliff roads that edged the Three Gorges.<sup>20</sup> He is the reputed author of the famous fifteenth-century manual on carpentry known as *Lǚ Bān's Secret Chart* (*Lǚ Bān Jīng* 鲁班经).



Fig. 378 His name painted beneath his chair, Wáng Yé, Zàoshén, or Zào Jūn, also known as the Kitchen God, sits in his judge's robes ready to report on the family's conduct to the Supreme Ruler on the twenty-third day of the final month of the year. Will the verdict be positive or reproachful? Notice that his feet are resting on two small animals, but what are they?



Fig. 379 Another variant of Wáng Yé, this one more benign in appearance in his role as Protector of the Family, but still sitting in judgment of the family's conduct. He returns on the first day of the Lunar New Year to watch over the family for another year.

## RECLINING MALE HOLDING A WINE CUP

The most likely candidate is one of China's most famous poets, **Lǐ Bó** or **Lǐ Bái** (李白, 701–62),<sup>21</sup> who wrote lovingly on the pleasures of wine and is often shown sleeping or reclining on a large wine jar (Fig. 380). Because he addressed some of his finest poems to the moon (the most famous being *Drinking Alone under the Moon*, *Yuè xià dú zhuó* 月下独酌)<sup>22</sup>, he is frequently represented as a lone figure, wine cup in hand, eyes and cup lifted towards the moon (Fig. 381). Be careful, though, as there are many other figures in popular Chinese art depicted lying drunkenly on wine jars. Such a figure could also be one of the Eight Immortals, or the pre-Tang poet Táo Yuānmíng (see next entry). Even Zhōng Kuí has been portrayed in such an intoxicated state.



Fig. 380 China's most famous poet, Lǐ Bó (variant Lǐ Bái), stemmed wine cup at his side, at work. Contemporary scroll. Courtesy of Eileen Deeley.



Fig. 381 A contemporary, but very ornate papercut of Lǐ Bó, wine cup lifted towards the moon, to which he addressed some of his finest poems. Courtesy of Sarah Zhu.

## MALE SITTING OR WALKING UNDER FIVE WILLOWS

The inclusion of five willows, three paths, and a bamboo in a landscape setting, are key clues to identifying the famous pre-Tang Dynasty poet **Táo Yuānmíng** (陶淵明), also known as Yuánliàng (元亮) or Táo Qián (陶潛). He is a famous poet (365–427) who retired from public life to write of “the simple contemplative life, renunciation, flight from the world, insight into the uselessness of all anxious striving, escape from tears and troubles, the independence of self-sufficient natures, the return to nature....”<sup>23</sup> Many of his poems refer to the landscape to which he retired, which included five willows, three paths, and bamboo. He is also depicted drinking [chrysanthemum] wine and/or growing chrysanthemums (see CHRYSANTHEMUM p. [24](#)).

## MALE WITH A SNAKE BODY OR HOLDING CARPENTRY TOOLS

**Fúxī** (伏羲) is credited with being the original ancestor of all Han Chinese. In ancient Han iconography, he is usually portrayed as a human being but with the lower half of his body tapering off into a dragon or snake’s tail (Fig. [385](#)). His likeness can also be found in contemporary Chinese temples, where he is more mortal-like, often holding tablets upon which appear the eight trigrams, or alternatively holding a knotted rope and carpenter’s square (Fig. [382](#)).





Fig. 382 Look carefully at the figure on the left and you will notice that he is holding a carpenter's square. It is the original ancestor of all Chinese, Fúxī. From the village temple of Sideng in Shaxi region, on what was once known as the "Tea and Horse" caravan trail that linked Tibet with Yunnan.

His wife is Nǚwā (女女尚), known as First Ancestress or the Mother of all Mankind. They are usually shown together, male and female, to represent the first couple – in their ancient form with their snake tails entwined, but in more modern temples simply seated or standing side by side, minus the ancient tails (Fig. [383](#)). Together they are said to have created mankind, domesticated animals, introduced fire and the Chinese language, and taught people how to use fishing nets and channel rivers.<sup>24</sup> Nǚwā is also credited with repairing the earth when the four poles supporting the sky collapsed, patching the sky with stones of five different colors and cutting off the legs of a giant tortoise to support the four corners of the sky (Fig. [384](#)).

An annual festival is still held every year in Nǚwā's honor at the Wa Huang Gong temple in Hebei Province and the Renzu temple complex in Huaiyang County in the eastern part of Henan Province.<sup>25</sup> Associated with Fúxī are the scroll-carrying horse (see HORSE p. [132](#)) and the book-bearing tortoise (see

TORTOISE p. [106](#)).



Fig. 383 Rubbing from an Eastern Han Dynasty tomb of Fúxī and Nǚwā with snake tails, holding the tools of ancient civilization.



Fig. 384 The Mother of all Mankind (Nǚwā). Tomb rubbing. Courtesy of Liu Baisha.



Fig. 385 **The Father of all Mankind (Fúxī).** Tomb rubbing. Courtesy of Liu Baisha.

## MALE PEASANT WITH A STRAW HAT

A single adult male usually portrayed in peasant clothing with a straw hat and brandishing a symbolic wooden forked stick is **Yǔ** or **Dà yǔ** (大禹), “the Great,” a mythological folk hero who neglected both himself and his family in his concentration and selfless perseverance in fighting a great flood that was threatening China. By diverting the floodwaters to the sea, and teaching the people flood control techniques, he is credited with creating the central river valley of China that gave birth to China’s civilization. As the heroic savior of the Chinese people, he is also recognized as the ancestor of the Xia Dynasty (approximately 2100– 1600 century BCE), although he is probably best known to Chinese as the third sage king of China’s Golden Age, following Yáo and Shùn.

## MALE DRESSED IN ANIMAL SKINS OR LEAVES

A single male dressed in animal skins or fig leaves, sometimes depicted holding an egg, is **Páng ŭ** (盘古) (Fig. [386](#)). At other times he is portrayed bearing a hammer and chisel, often with one or two horns protruding from his head.

There are several creation myths in Chinese mythology, and Pángǔ, as the

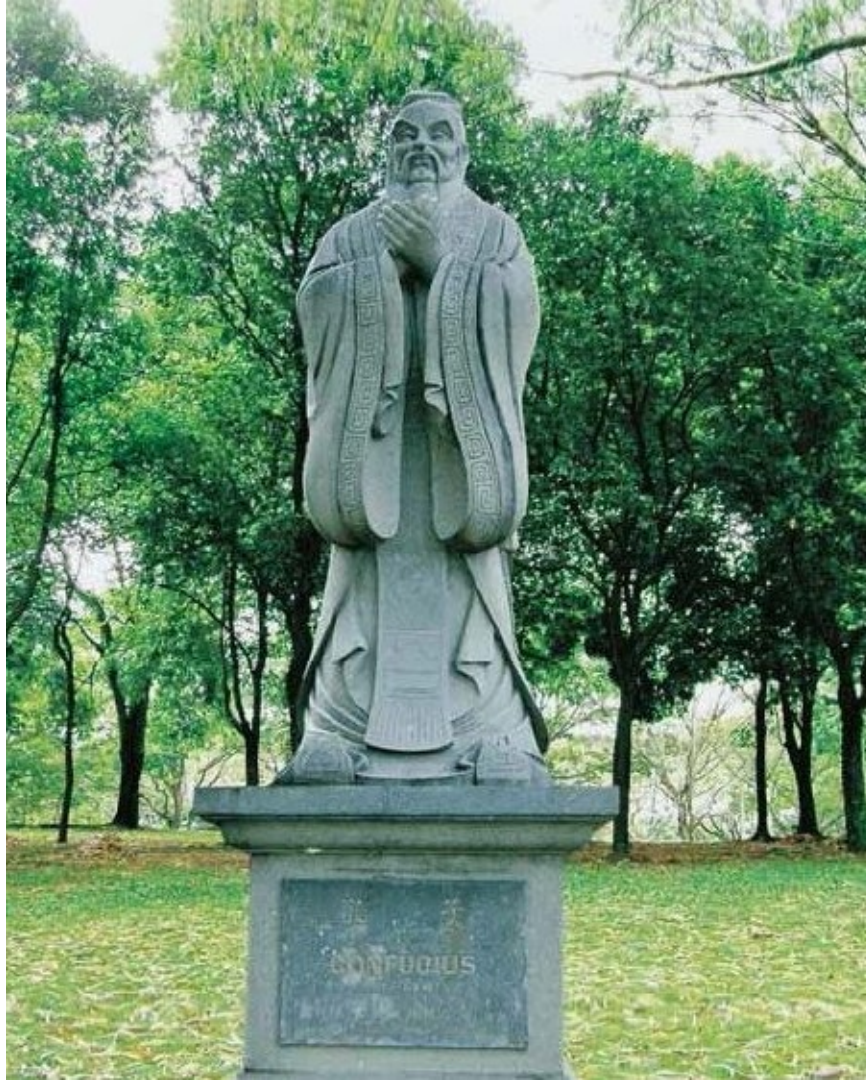
male creator of the universe, stars in one of them. In this version, after emerging from a primordial cosmic egg, Pángǔ grows for 18,000 years at the rate of ten feet per day until his giant body blows apart (*pán* in Chinese means “coiled” while *gǔ* means “ancient”), creating all the elements of the world as we know them today: the egg white became the heavens and the yolk, the earth. “His breath became the wind and clouds; his voice became peals of thunder. His left eye became the sun; his right eye became the moon.”<sup>26</sup>

As one of mankind’s original ancestors, his likeness is still found in contemporary Chinese temples, where he is generally portrayed in human form, but with a horn or two. “Based on the fact that the Pangu myth was not recorded in literature until as late as the Three Kingdoms era, some Chinese scholars believe that the Pangu myth migrated from non-Han Chinese culture ... nevertheless, many Chinese scholars insist that the Pangu myth is of Han Chinese origin.”<sup>27</sup>



Fig. 386 Pángǔ is credited with having burst forth from an egg, from which he creates the universe, the egg white becoming the heavens and the yolk the earth. From the village temple of Sideng, Shaxi region, Yunnan, along the famous “Tea and Horse” caravan trail that linked Tibet with Yunnan.





**Fig. 387 Confucius, probably the single most important influence on Chinese culture. Emerging in a period of considerable political unrest (sixth century BCE), he taught the importance of reciprocity in relationships and proper behavior. One of the eight Chinese Legendary Hero statues in Singapore's Marina City Park donated by Tee Yih Jia Food Manufacturing Pte Ltd.**



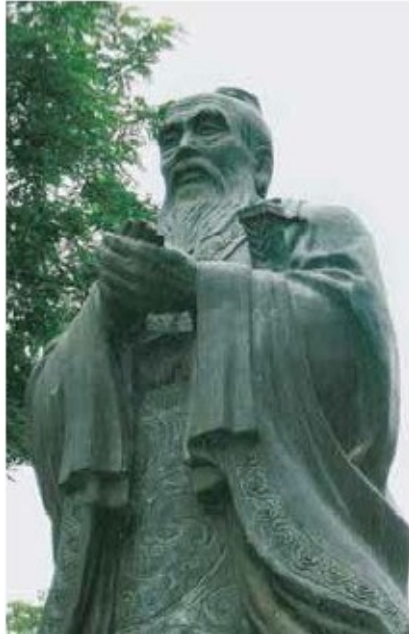


Fig. 388 The great statue of “The Sage” from the grounds of Beijing’s Confucius Temple. Notice how both statues depict Confucius’s hands clasped together at chest height, his hair knotted in a scholar’s bun.

## OLD MAN IN TRADITIONAL ROBES

A single older male with the obligatory and honorary beard and whiskers in the traditional robes of the gentleman-scholar, usually holding books, is **Confucius** (Kǒng Fūzǐ 孔夫子), the founder of Confucianism (Figs. [387](#), [388](#)). Confucius was born in 551 BCE and is best remembered as the philosopher who gave China its belief in the importance of moral behavior. Confucius taught that the basis of a well-run state was an ordered society. The basic building block was the relationship that exists between any two human beings (defined as *rén* 仁 and usually translated as “benevolence, human-heartedness”). Knowing one’s place in a relationship, defined in five all-embracing human relationships – ruler to subject, parent to child, husband to wife, older brother to younger brother, older friend to younger friend – came with clear guidelines as to the way one should behave (*yí* 义). All were based on the simple principles of altruism, conscientiousness, and reciprocity. The superior protects and provides, the junior is loyal and obedient. A stress on etiquette, ceremonies, and rites (*lǐ* 礼) meant there was respect for tradition, which ensured stability and continuity. To ensure that one understood what right behavior required, Confucius stressed the

importance of education and differentiated between “gentlemen” (*jūnzi* 君子) who love knowledge and righteousness as opposed to “lesser beings” (*xiǎorén* 小人) who lack proper understanding and thus only love profit and pettiness. He was undoubtedly the single most important cultural influence on Chinese civilization.

## TALL, REGAL GENTLEMAN WITH HIS LONG HAIR KNOTTED IN A BUN

**Qū Yuán** (屈原, 343–277 BCE, known in Wade-Giles as Ch’ü Yuán) is frequently depicted on scrolls and in statuary and is easily recognized by his Warring States Period sage’s clothing and hairstyle. He is a tall, regal-looking man reflecting his noble heritage, with his long hair knotted in a bun and bearing a goatee and moustache to reflect his age and wisdom (Figs. [389-390](#)).

Qū Yuán was an exiled noble who had been banished from the court for his unpopular reformist views. He eventually drowned himself (“I would prefer to jump into the river and be entombed in the stomachs of fishes than to bow while purity is defiled by vulgar pestilence...”) when he realized he could not influence the conduct of the nation’s ruler. When news of his death reached the common people, they rushed out in boats to search for his body, which was never found. In order to keep it from being eaten by fish and crabs, they threw rice balls wrapped in bamboo or reed leaves and tied with colorful threads (*zòngzi* 粽子) into the water, a practice still repeated in some villages and regions, although today more *zòngzi* are eaten than thrown into rivers as offerings. Today’s “dragon boat” races, held across China on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, and elsewhere on more random dates, are the re-enactment of the people’s rushing out in boats to attempt to save Qū Yuán (Fig. [391](#)).



Fig. 389 Qū Yuán, the great poet and statesman who drowned himself in protest over an unrighteous ruler during the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE). Detail from a scroll. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

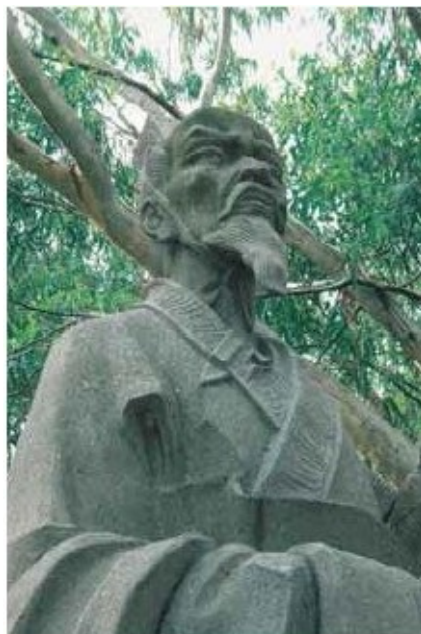


Fig. 390 Qū Yuán is the subject of one of the eight statues commemorating Chinese legendary heroes that were erected in Singapore's Marina City Park in 1991. The sculptures were commissioned and donated by Tee Yih Jia Food Manufacturing Pte Ltd.

Qū Yuán, who used his years in exile to collect legends and write poetry, is generally regarded as one of China's greatest poets. He is credited with being the author of the collection of poems known as the *Shǔ Cí* (楚辭, *Songs or Elegies of Chu*) and *Tiānwèn* (天問, "Dialogue with Heaven"), a poem comprising 172 questions and answers that contains many of our oldest references to Chinese myths (such as Hòu Yì shooting down the nine suns and the story of the toad on the moon). He is also the author of the famous poem *Lí Sāo* (離騷), most likely written during his exile, and usually translated as "Sorrow after Departure."



Fig. 391 Lǎo Zǐ, simply clad, astride his ox, departing China. Drawing courtesy of Sonja Bjaaland.



Fig. 392 A porcelain statue of a dragon boat. When news of Qū Yuán's death reached the masses, they were said to have rushed out in boats to search for his body, which was never found. In order to keep it from being eaten by the fish and crabs, they threw rice balls into the water, the origin of today's "dragon boat races."

## OLD, BEWHISKERED MALE IN SIMPLE ROBES RIDING AN OX

This is the reputed historical founder of Daoism, **Lǎo Zǐ** (老子) or "Old Master" (Fig. [391](#)). According to Chinese tradition, Lǎo Zǐ decided to leave China because of its corrupt rulers, but as he was leaving the country on the back of an ox, he was stopped at the western border by the guards, and asked to write down his philosophy. The result was Daoism's most famous text, the *Tao-te Ching* (*Dàodéjīng* in Pinyin, 道德經), which dates back to the sixth century BCE. Its opening lines read: "The dao that can spoken is not the eternal dao. The name



that can be named is not the eternal Name.”

Scholars agree that the first depictions of Lǎo Zǐ did not appear until about the fifth century.<sup>28</sup> Before then, he was probably represented by such aniconic symbols as an empty seat beneath a sacred canopy or umbrella, which was the way many spiritual leaders were depicted (including the great Hindu philosophers and the historical Buddha). Later, as Daoism’s focus changed from understanding and acting in parallel with nature (understood as “The Way”, Dào 道) to controlling nature by means of magic elixirs and other practices in the search for immortality, he was deified. But as Confucianism and its tenets became institutionalized, there was an interest once again in some circles of its near nemesis, Daoism. Daoism, with its belief in “naturalness,” laissez-faire behavior (which should, it was believed, also apply to governments), and “doing through not doing,” was the natural complement to the rigid structures, prescribed actions, and formalities of Confucianism. And what better representation of Daoism than that of the simple philosopher astride an ox?

Religious figures, especially those of Chan Buddhism (better known by its Japanese counterpart, Zen), are popular subjects of Chinese paintings. Some are recognizable by the mounts they ride and other attributes (for example, the monk **Bùdài** (布袋), usually transliterated as Putai or Hotei in Japanese, balanced on a reed (see p. [192](#)), and **Bodhidharma**, the monk reputed to have brought the teachings of Chan Buddhism to China from India via Tibet (see p. [192](#)), portrayed in rags, carrying a tramp’s bag). If you have sought in vain to identify a figure and not found him in this section, continue your search in the pages that look at important figures in Buddhism (pp. [184–99](#)).

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lee Siow Mong, *Spectrum of Chinese Culture*, Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 1986, p. [185](#).

<sup>2</sup> Rose Kerr (ed.), *The T. T. Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art: Chinese Art and Design*, London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1991, p. [176](#).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Zhou Xun and Gao Chunming, *5000 Years of Chinese Costumes*, Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1984, and Verity Wilson, *Chinese Dress*, London: Oxford University Press in association with Bamboo Publishing Ltd and the Victoria & Albert Museum, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Wang Yao-t’ing (trans. Stone Studio), in *Looking at Chinese Painting*, Tokyo: Nigensha Publishing, 1996, p. [91](#), explains that “impossibly large heads ... is the artist’s solution for expressing the figure’s great age.”

- 5 A tally was an object that could be separated, with each of the two halves kept by one of two parties as a form of credential verification, for example, to record an agreed number or order or privilege. In its simplest form, it was an elongated stick, but there are also extant examples of tallies in the form of tigers, known as *hǔ fú* (虎符), presumably used by the military. Such textual references as “like two halves of a tally” and “broke in two the Ts’u tally” are common in Chinese texts. Marco Polo also referred to the use of a tally stick in China for keeping track of records. In art, it is sometimes used as a homophone for the *fú* that means “good luck” (福). *Hù*, on the other hand, were tablets that were held by officials in front of their chests when received in audience by the emperor.
- 6 Because he was a butcher and a wine-seller before becoming one of the three heroes, Zhāng Fēi is known as the God of Butchers and his statue or picture, with long hair and flowing moustache, can sometimes be found in butcher shops. Liú Bèi’s (刘安) humble origins were as a seller of straw shoes. He later became the first emperor of the Minor Han Dynasty (CE 221).
- 7 Stephen Little, *Daoism and the Arts of China*, Chicago, Illinois: The Art Institute of Chicago in association with University of California Press, 2000, pp. 23–4.
- 8 Kerr, *The T. T. Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art*, p. 74.
- 9 There is a very fine example in Singapore’s Asian Civilisations Museum, in the Hickley Déhuà (德化, *blanc-de-chine*) collection.
- 10 Basil M. Alexeiev, in “The Chinese Gods of Wealth,” lecture delivered at the School of Oriental Studies, University of London, March 26, 1926,” describes one such scroll as consisting of nine characters, each with nine strokes (*zhēn shì huó cái shén lái dào zán jiā* 真是活財神來到咱家), that translates into “Truly a living Cǎi Shén comes to our house.” During each of the eighty-one days of winter, “simple folk” would fill in one stroke. The stroke count, however, seems to add up to eighty-two, nor does each character consist of nine strokes, points noted by Eileen Deeley, one of the early readers of this manuscript.
- 11 For an excellent example, visit <http://www.charm.ru/library/charm1.htm>.
- 12 Another excellent scroll, although of a later date (Qing Dynasty), exists in the University of California Berkeley’s East Asian Library. To see it, visit <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Rubbings/>
- 13 Eugene Wang and Zheng Yan, “Romancing the Stone: An Archway in Shandong,” *Orientations*, Vol. 35, No. 22, 2004, p. 96.
- 14 Wú Dàozi (also known in Wade-Giles as Wu Tao-tse, ca. 690–760) was a famous landscape painter who one day painted a large fresco landscape and then was said to walk into it to disappear forever. See Werner Speiser, *The Art of China: Spirit and Society*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1966, p. 150.
- 15 This is the emperor famous for indulging the beautiful concubine Yáng Guǐfēi (Yùhuán), who was later murdered by the emperor’s troops for the role she played in the downfall of the empire.
- 16 Zhōng Kuí is depicted riding a spotted deer on a very rare seventeenth-century 17 inch (43 cm) high blue-and-white sleeve vase that was on display autumn 2003 at Imperial Oriental Art, 790 Madison Avenue, New York.
- 17 Wang and Zheng, “Romancing the Stone,” p. 97.
- 18 This figure is also well known in Japan where he appears on posters on the fifth day of the fifth month (Boy’s Day in Japan) to protect the boys of the family from evil spirits during the festivities. His name

in Japan is Shoki.

[19](#) Also translated into English as *Outlaws of the Marsh* and *All Men Are Brothers*.

[20](#) According to legend, Lǚ Bān and the Goddess of Mercy (Guānyīn) wanted to do something to help mankind, so while she embroidered 100 pairs of shoes, he began building a road on the dangerous cliff face. It was a wager, however, to see who could accomplish their task in the course of one night, and the goddess, fearing she was losing, crowed like a rooster to trick Lǚ Bān into stopping work, leaving the road unfinished, but with a series of holes into which planks could be positioned behind. These ancient holes enabled the Chinese for generations to build their road along the steep cliffs of the Three Gorges. <http://www.chinapage.org/3gorge/cliffroad.html>

[21](#) He is certain to be better known to readers as Lǐ Bái, but most scholars now agree that Lǐ Bó was probably the correct pronunciation of the second character in his name during the Tang Dynasty.

[22](#) The opening lines, as translated by Arthur Waley:

Among the flowers from a pot of wine I drink alone beneath the bright moonshine. I raise my cup to invite the moon, who blends Her light with my shadow and we're three friends. The moon does not know how to drink her share; In vain my shadow follows me here and there. Together with them for the time I stay And make merry before spring's sped away....

[23](#) Speiser, *The Art of China*, p. [109](#)

[24](#) On the east slope of Cave No. 285 in Dunhuang, visitors can see Fúxī and Nǚ wā facing each other, both with a human head and snake body. "Their hair is tied up and they wear cross-collared, large-sleeved short dresses. On their chests are drawn a sun and a moon respectively. They both have a scarf draped on their shoulders. In one hand Fúxī holds a square and in the other he holds the carpenter's inkmark. Nǚ wā holds a pair of dividers in her raised hands. Her sleeves flutter in the wind as she moves briskly." [http://ignca.nic.in/ks\\_19014.htm](http://ignca.nic.in/ks_19014.htm)

[25](#) See the various descriptions of this festival as well as popular folk tales concerning the deities that live on today in Yang Lihui and An Deming, with Jessica Anderson Turner, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology, Handbooks of World Mythology*, Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2005, pp. [16](#) ff.

[26](#) *Wu yun li-nien chi*, cited in *Yi shih, Pi-chi ts'ung pien* 1.2a. Quoted in Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction*, Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, p. [33](#).

[27](#) Yang and An, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology*, p. [180](#). For example, the Nàxī minority people of southwest China believe that mankind was born from a primordial egg. Some Nàxī villages in Yunnan still have an egg kept in a secluded spot that is used in village rituals. The Miao people believe that they originated from the egg of a butterfly that took twelve years to hatch under the watchful eye of a mythical bird. When it hatched, there emerged the father of the Miao people plus a number of auspicious animals, including a tiger, snake, centipede, and dragon.

[28](#) Wu Hung, "A Deity Without Form: The Earliest Representation of Laozi and the Concept of Wei in Chinese Ritual Art," *Orientations*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 2002, pp. [38](#) ff.



Fig. 393 Hǎn Xiāngzǐ, an Immortal. Detail from a scroll. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.



## Chapter 9

# GROUPS OF FIGURES

Groups of individuals are easier to identify than solitary figures in Chinese art. The entries below are arranged in order of the size of the group (two, three, four, seven, eight, sixteen, eighteen members) with the first group of three being the exception. As the trio of three deities known as **Fú Lú Shòu** are so frequently depicted, they take precedence over all the other groupings.

### TRIO OF CHINESE DEITIES

The most common grouping is the trio of Chinese deities known collectively as **Fú Lù Shòu** (才虽禄寿) discussed singly on pp. [159–60](#)). This auspicious group comprises the God of Blessings (**Fú** or **Fúxīng**) who usually holds a young child (p. [367](#)). These three deities appear on scrolls and ceramics, but their most popular form is as a group of three free-standing figures found in many traditional Chinese homes and businesses.

### TWO DOOR GODS

The two door gods portrayed on paper strips guarding many a door throughout the Chinese world are reputed to be the two Tang Dynasty generals **Qín Qióng** 秦琼 (also known as Qín Shūbǎo 秦叔宝) and **Hú Jìngdé** 胡敬德 (also known as Yùchí<sup>1</sup> Jìngdé 尉迟敬德 or Yùchí Gōng 尉迟恭), who guarded the sleepless Emperor Tàizōng's (太宗, r. 626–49) tent against menacing bad spirits so he could rest in peace (Figs. [394–397](#)). After a few nights' sound sleep, however, the emperor feared for his two guardians' health so he ordered paintings of their likenesses to be hung in their place, and there they have remained ever since. Qín Qióng is usually portrayed with a white face and Hú Jìngdé with a dark face. Each carries a sword.

These two Tang Dynasty warriors were merged with two earlier guards who featured in an ancient Daoist legend of two brothers, **Shén Tú** (神荼) and **Yù Lǚ** (有口鱼), who lived under a giant peach tree whose branches covered the entrance



to the Spirit World where all the ghosts went in and out. Their role was to throw the evil ghosts to hungry tigers. Shén Tú and Yù Lěi can be identified by their weapons – Shén Tú a battle-axe and Yù Lěi a mace. This tale inspired a legendary emperor to bid the common people to paint their prototypes, and that of a tiger, on their doors to protect their homes. Stories of these two figures date back at least to the Han Dynasty, when it was related that it was common for people to post such pictures at Chinese New Year. Other door gods evolved based on popular local heroes from the romantic novels of the times, so there exists a wide range of guardian personages with their respective clothing, weapons, etc. Many, but not all, have their names printed alongside to help in identification. Door god posters are still hung in China today and are renewed at the time of the Chinese New Year.



Fig. 394 The door god Qín Shūbǎo, also known as Qín Qióng, represents a God of Wealth in this poster. He holds a large carp to signal “plenty,” a lotus to symbolize “peace,” a golden ingot in his right hand with the inscription *yǒu yú* (“have surplus”), and another sword decorated with a smaller golden ingot and the character *fú* for “blessings, good fortune.” On his chest is the character *cái*, which means “wealth, money.”



Fig. 395 This family in southwest China is taking no chances. On and above their auspicious red front door are a number of good luck posters and placards. The two gods on horseback (to add the concept of immediacy) are the two Tang Dynasty generals, Hú Jìngdé and Qín Qióng. The poster on the left bears the character for “moon” at the top, and the poster on the right the character for “sun,” as the gods guard the home day and night.



Fig. 396 A pair of door god posters on a door in Lijiang, Yunnan. Both posters have large characters. The one on the right is *fù*, meaning “wealth” or “riches,” while the one on the left is *fú*, meaning “blessings, good fortune” and “happiness.” Note the baskets of symbolic and real riches at their feet.



Fig. 397 Mounted door gods. The characters at the top read “moon” and “sun”. The horses are a pun on the words “on horse[back]” (*mǎshàng*) as *mǎshàng* also means “right away” or “immediately.” Hence, the final meaning on the left (*mǎshàngfācái*) is “get rich quickly” and on the right (*mǎdàogōngchéng*) “win instant success.”

## TWO OLD MEN PLAYING CHESS

Two old men playing chess, at times with a third observer, is a common but more problematic motif (Figs. [398](#), [399](#)).<sup>2</sup> Some sources believe the players are the old Gods of the North and South Poles representing “a fable in which they granted longevity.”<sup>3</sup> According to Chinese mythology, the God of the South Pole (who later evolved into the God of Longevity) fixes the date of a mortal’s birth, while the God of the North Pole fixes that of their death. However, there is another legend that identifies the two chess players as “the matchmaker Yuexialaoye [**Yuèxià lǎoyé** 月下老爷], the old man in the moon who presides over all earthly marriages ...[and] the God of Longevity....<sup>4</sup> Regardless of the identification of the players, all the sources agree that any unwary observer who stops to watch the game will find themselves so caught up in it that a surprising number of years will pass before they are able to continue on their way. This motif is found decorating many of the small personal silver items that were worn by the well-to-do during the Qing Dynasty.<sup>5</sup> It is also a popular design on boxes, cabinets, etc.

## FOUR NOBLE OCCUPATIONS

A group of four men, each representing a profession is known as the Four Noble Occupations. At one time this was a popular snuff bottle design as it depicted men in the four “noble” professions of Confucian China (scholars, farmers,

woodsmen, and fishermen). The military was not regarded as a “noble” occupation.

## FOUR ARTS OF THE SCHOLAR

A less common grouping of four men, each engaged in a single activity – playing the *qín* (a seven-string instrument that resembles a zither), chess, calligraphy, and painting – is known as the Four Arts of the Scholar (*qín qí shū huà* 琴棋書畫). This motif is usually incorporated into a larger picture, however, as the acceptable pastimes of such groups as the eighteen scholars (see p. [182](#)).



Fig. 398 Two old men play chess (not the game known as chess in the West, but a game using black and white round markers to capture territories, known in Chinese as *wéiqí*) while an observer stands nearby. The players are usually identified as the Gods of the North and South Pole but there are other variants. The one staple of the story is the number of years that pass while the game is being played, always to the surprise of the innocent bystander. Carved agate snuff bottle.



Fig. 399 A carved wooden door with the chess players theme. Note that they are playing under a Chinese Parasol or Phoenix Tree. From an elm cabinet.

## FOUR CLASSICAL HEROES

A group of four composed of a Buddhist monk on horseback, an anthropomorphic monkey, a pig-monster, and a water demon are the lead characters in the great Chinese classic novel *Journey to the West* (*Xī Yóu Jì* 西游记), published in the late sixteenth century. The four heroes are **Xuánzàng** (玄奘, the Buddhist monk), **Sūn Wùkōng** (孫悟空, the Monkey King), **Zhū Wùnéng** (豬悟能, the pig-monster), and **Shā Wùjìng** (沙和尚, the water demon (Fig. 400). This wonderful novel, which is the source of many modern Chinese comic books and films, follows the adventures of the four wanderers as they traveled from China to India in search of Buddhist scriptures at the bidding of Guānyīn, the Goddess of Mercy and Compassion (see p. 201). The scenes depicted will all reflect pivotal moments in the novel's story and will be familiar to knowledgeable Chinese observers. See also monkey p. 137.

## SEVEN SAGES



Seven men in assorted relaxed poses most likely comprise the third to fifth-century group of recluses known as the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grotto [or Bamboo Grove] (*Zhúlín Qīxián* 竹林七贤).<sup>6</sup> All seven figures were said to be semi-historical scholars, statesmen, or officials who turned their backs on traditional careers, rife with inherent political dangers and boredom, to spend their lives pursuing their own interests, occasionally gathering together in pleasant discourse, discussing art and literature, listening to music, and drinking wine. In Chinese art, they are sometimes accompanied by young servants or retainers, but are usually shown in casual attire in a bamboo grove or forest, reclining against rocks, playing chess or musical instruments, conversing, or lifting a wine cup to their lips. Because they chose to disenfranchise themselves from the Confucian establishment, they became a popular symbol for others who also preferred to stand apart from the formal structures of society and government in defiance of the belief that a life dedicated to public service was the sole worthy path. Over time, pictures of the seven sages became more and more popular, even becoming a theme amongst the samurai class of feudal Japan.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most famous of the seven recluses was **Liú Líng** (劉伶), immortalized by his famous essay on wine drinking which included such instructions as “get drunk before colorful flowers in order to absorb their light and colour; at night get drunk in the snow to clear your thoughts....”<sup>8</sup> It is said that Liú Líng used to walk around drinking continuously, followed by a man carrying a shovel who could bury him if he ever literally fell over “dead drunk.”



Fig. 400 The lead characters from the great sixteenth-century Chinese novel, *Journey to the West* – the Monkey King, Buddhist monk, pig-monster, and water demon. The novel follows the adventures of the four wanderers as they travel from China to India in search of Buddhist scriptures. Mural from a temple wall in Dali.

A word on the importance of wine in ancient China would not be out of place. In China, only two drinks were available traditionally – tea and wine. The art of wine drinking was therefore not taken lightly. Attendance at a minimum of two annual “district wine-drinking ceremonies [*xiāng yǐn jiǔ lǐ* 乡饮酒礼], a reputedly Chou [*sic*] dynasty ritual in which men of a district [*xiāng* 乡] gathered to drink wine (*yǐnjiǔ* 饮酒), eat, and listen to music, all with the utmost gravity” was even one of the prerequisites to qualifying for the civil service examinations at one point during the Song Dynasty.<sup>9</sup> Games that combined wine drinking with spontaneous poetic recitations were very popular among the élite. One of China’s most famous poets, Lǐ Bó (李白, see p. [165](#)) wrote lovingly on the pleasures of wine, and is often depicted with a wine cup within reach (see Fig. [380](#)), even sleeping or reclining on a large wine jar. Because he addressed some of his finest poems to the moon, he is also frequently represented as a solitary figure, wine cup in hand, eyes and cup raised towards the moon.

## EIGHT IMMORTALS

The most popular group in Chinese art consists of seven males and one female – the Eight Immortals (Bāxiān 八仙) – who represent the attainment of the Daoist ideal, immortality. The transformation of early philosophical Daoism into a movement in search of immortality through alchemy and other means is beyond the scope of this book, but its goals were attractive to both staid Confucians and simple country folk who felt secure in a structured society that revered age and rewarded knowledge, so many Daoist symbols and beliefs found their way into mainstream Chinese thought. The search for immortality and all its stories of magic peaches, elixirs of longevity, and mortals who succeeded in their quest for immortality, are encapsulated in the stories and iconography of the Eight [Daoist] Immortals. The word used for “immortals” and “fairies” (*xiān* 仙) is composed of a “man” on the left (人) and “mountains” on the right (山), clearly expressing the idea that these are recluses from the world who have retired into the mountains, or in the case of celestial beings, heaven or the Isles of the Blest. *Bā* (八) is the number “eight.”

“The earliest depictions of the group come from the ceiling walls of two Jin dynasty tombs excavated in Shanxi province, one of which is dated to 1210,”<sup>[10](#)</sup> just before the Yuan Dynasty (1260–1368), the period during which we know they became popularized by Yuan dramatists. Having abandoned the civilized world, they retreated to live in harmony in nature, practicing spiritual and mental discipline, and shunning cooked food to live on pinecones and dew in order to achieve immortality (but, once immortal, wine was clearly back on the menu).

They are thus usually depicted at their leisure in dream-like surroundings, although one of the most common renditions of this group of eight is the arrangement known as “The Eight Immortals Cross the Sea” (*Bāxiān guòhǎi* 八仙过海). This scene shows the group on their way to attend a banquet for Xī Wángmǔ (西王母, also known as the Queen Mother of the West (p. [401](#), [402](#))). You can confirm their identification from their individual attributes, for example, Hàn Zhōnglí’s fan.

The Eight Immortals reside in a paradise known as the Isles of the Blest in pavilions of silver and gold. This paradise was believed to consist of three or more mountains isolated in the Eastern Sea (see poem p. [18](#)) – Fāngzhàng (方

丈),<sup>11</sup> Pénglái (蓬莱), and Yíngzhōu (瀛洲) – sometimes referred to collectively as Pénglái. Paintings of these mountains (or a mountain) became known as *fānghú* (方壶) paintings. One of the best-known scrolls with this motif, dating from the Kāngxī reign, is *The Fānghú Isle of the Immortals* (1699) by Wáng Yún (王云, 1652–1735). Today it hangs in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City (Fig. 403). It was precisely these islands that the earliest Chinese rock gardens, from the Han Dynasty, were believed to be mimicking. China’s many artificial pond gardens were also created to depict these sacred islands, including Beijing’s famous Beihai Park.<sup>12</sup>

### The Eight Immortals

Name	Gender	Identifying Characteristics	Patron of
Hàn Zhōnglí (汉钟离) (Zhōnglí Quán), known as Hàn Zhōnglí because he lived during the Han Dynasty	male	always holds a feather or palm-leaf fan, chubby, often with stomach bared, sometimes holds a peach	the military
Zhāng Guôlǎo (张果老)	male	white donkey, phoenix feather, peach, bamboo percussion instrument	artists and calligraphers
Lǚ Dòngbīn (吕洞宾)	male	sword slung over back, right hand holds Daoist fly whisk, sometimes slumped over a wine cask	barbers
Lǐ Tiēguǎi (李铁拐)	male	dressed in rags, metal crutch, holds calabash gourd bottle	the ill
Hán Xiāngzi (韩湘子)	male	flute	musicians
Hé Xiāngū (何仙姑)	female	long-stemmed lotus, peach, or a flowering branch, sometimes	housewives

		playing a musical instrument or sipping wine	
Lán Cǎihé (蓝采和)	male or female (hermaphrodite)	basket of flowers or fruit, often missing a shoe	florists and gardeners
Cáo Guójiù (曹国舅)	male	court clothing as he is a nobleman, scepter, castanets/ jade clappers	actors and actresses

Even incense burners, known as *bóshānlú* (博山炉), were made in the shape of these mountain peaks rising over waves (Fig. [404](#)). They date back to the Qin (221–206 BCE) and the beginning of the Han (206 BCE) Dynasties and can be seen in several museum collections.<sup>[13](#)</sup>

Although usually depicted as a group of eight, the Immortals are also pictured in smaller groups of three and singly, so it is important to look for the attributes and accessories that identify them. Their images can be found on paintings, scrolls, fans, ceramics, embroidery, banners,<sup>[14](#)</sup> and even furniture. Embroidered hangings or tapestries featuring the Eight Immortals were often hung up on festive occasions, which explains why so many are found today. Even traditional children’s caps would feature thin metallic bands of the Eight Immortals to protect their young wearers (Fig. [405](#)).



Fig. 401 One of the Eight Immortals, Lǐ Tiēguǎi, atop a crab, in a scene known as “The Eight Immortals Cross the Sea” or “Each According to Their Abilities.” Detail from a wooden box inlaid with mother-of-pearl.





Fig. 402 Another detail from “The Eight Immortals Cross the Sea,” this one depicting Hàn Zhōnglǐ, identifiable by his fan, riding on a fish. Detail from a wooden box inlaid with mother-of-pearl.



Fig. 403 *The Fanghu Isle of the Immortals*, 1699, Chinese, Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). Wang Yun (1652–1734). Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk (141.92 x 60.32 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase acquired through the Fortieth Anniversary Fund, F75-43. Photograph by Robert Newcombe.

**Hàn Zhōnglí** (汉钟离), also known as Zhōnglí Quán (钟离权), is said to have been a former general during the Han Dynasty who, having suffered defeat on an expedition against the Tibetans, became a fugitive in the mountains where he eventually attained immortality (Figs. [406](#), [408](#)). He is the most important of the Eight Immortals and is always shown with his feather fan, which is used to revive the dead. He is rendered both standing or reclining, almost always pleasantly plump with a bared stomach.<sup>15</sup> He is closely associated and often portrayed with another one of the Eight Immortals, Lǚ Dòngbīn.



Fig. 404 A bronze *bōshānlú* censer and cover on a figural base. Western Han Dynasty, late second to first century BCE. Height 95/8 inches (24.5 cm). Courtesy of an American private collection. Photograph by Maggie Nimkin.



Fig. 405 This hat, part of a costume that would have been worn in a Chinese opera performance, is decorated with eight tin figurines each representing one of the Eight Immortals.



Fig. 406 Hàn Zhōnglí carries a fan which he uses to revive the dead. He is almost invariably portrayed with a large belly. Wooden statue.



Fig. 407 From left to right: Hán Xiāngzi, Zhāng Guǒlǎo, and Hé Xiāngū. Detail from a painting. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.



Fig. 408 Hàn Zhōnglí with his feather fan. Painted ceramic figure.





Fig. 409 A relaxed Zhāng Guǒlǎo, easily identified by the bamboo tube he is holding with two rods protruding from it, known as a *yúgǔ*. Detail from a ceramic bowl.



Fig. 410 Zhāng Guǒlǎo, again identified by the bamboo tube instrument he is carrying. At times he also holds a tiny donkey which can grow to full size to transport him over long distances, a phoenix feather, or a peach. Painted ceramic figure.



Figs. 411, 412 Lǚ Dòngbīn, best known for his prowess at fighting and love of wine, is often depicted sleeping over a cask of wine but always with his famous sword strapped to his back. Painted ceramic figure.



Fig. 413 Lǐ Tiěguāi lost his leg in an unfortunate accident so uses an iron crutch (his name means “Li with the iron crutch”). He carries a large calabash gourd filled with magic medicines. Painted ceramic figure.



Fig. 414 A Cizhou-style double gourd vase with the motif of a donkey. The *húlú* shape of the vase, together with the donkey that appears to be flying through the air, identifies this piece as decorated in the style of the Immortal Zhāng Guǒlǎo. Height 32 cm.

**Zhāng Guǒlǎo** (张果老), who used to travel on a white donkey that could cover a thousand *li* in a single day,<sup>16</sup> is usually depicted riding on his donkey, sometimes seated backwards, facing the tail, but is also portrayed with a bamboo percussion instrument known as a *yúgǔ* (鱼鼓) that consists of a bamboo tube with the two rods used to beat it, a phoenix feather, or a peach (Figs. [409](#), [410](#)). Sometimes he rides a toad. A charm or talisman of a donkey lying upside down with its feet in the air is a symbol of this Immortal, as it is said that Zhāng Guǒlǎo

could shrink the donkey to fit into a small container when it was not needed, and revive it with a few drops of liquid when it was needed (Fig. [414](#)) (see DONKEY p. [129](#)). The Cleveland Museum of Art has a charming Kāngxī Period (康熙, r. 1661–1722) plate depicting Zhāng Guǒlǎo and his famous donkey.

**Lǚ Dòngbīn** (吕洞宾) is best known for his prodigious wine drinking and prowess at fighting. Inspired by an historical figure from the eighth century, his story is one of a would-be scholar who, having twice failed to pass the civil service examinations, turned to other interests (Figs. [411](#), [412](#)). He is identified by his magic *yin/yang* sword, given him at the age of twenty by a powerful dragon, which he usually wears strapped on his back. As a result, he is credited with fighting dragons and tigers. He invariably carries a fly whisk in his right hand. As the rescuer of the only female member of the group, Hé Xiānggū, he is highly regarded and often depicted with her (she carries her characteristic long-stemmed lotus). There is a Chinese idiom, “to snarl and snap at Lǚ Dòngbīn” (*gǒu yǎo Lǚ Dòngbīn* 狗咬吕洞宾), which means “to mistake a good man for a bad man.”

**Lǐ Tiěguǎi** (李铁拐) lost his true leg through an unfortunate accident (the stories vary but the most popular is that while visiting the Daoist sage Lǎo Zi, his body was mistakenly cremated and the only body he could find as a replacement was that of a crippled beggar), thus earning him the name “Li with the iron crutch” (Fig. [413](#)). He always wears a tattered garment, and is generally bent over his iron crutch (*tiěguǎi*), carrying a calabash gourd (*húlu*) filled with magic medicines from which a bat, which represents good fortune, sometimes flies (Figs. [415](#), [416](#)). At times he is accompanied by a crab, a symbol of longevity through one’s descendants, or a deer, another Daoist symbol of immortality.<sup>17</sup> He is one of the most popular of the Eight Immortals and his statue graces many a Chinese mantel and bookshelf.

**Hán Xiāngzi** (韩湘子) is reputed to be the grandnephew of a famous ninth-century scholar and is identified by the flute he carries or plays (Figs. [393](#), [417](#), [418](#)). He is also attributed with being able to make flowers and fruits grow out of season, and to be able to tell the future. He is the patron of musicians.

**Hé Xiānggū** (何仙姑) is easily recognized as she is the only true female in the group. Immortal since the age of fourteen, she flies through the air collecting fruit for her mother and is usually shown holding a lotus (Figs. [419](#), [420](#)), peach (see p. [55](#)), or other fruit. She sometimes holds a fly whisk, as fly whisks (made of

an animal's tail) symbolize grace and elegance as well as the Buddhist prohibition on taking life. She is sometimes depicted drinking wine. According to the legends, she once lost her way in the forest and was threatened by a demon but Lǚ Dòngbīn suddenly appeared and saved her. He is said to have given her the peach, which turned her into an Immortal. Her great beauty associates her with the Daoist goddess Mágū (see p. [206](#)).

**Lán Cǎihé** (蓝采和) is identified as an hermaphrodite and thus is sometimes depicted as a young male, sometimes as a young female, but most often is androgynous (Figs. [422](#), [425](#)). When not holding a basket of fruit or flowers, Lán Cǎihé holds a flute or bowl. (S)he is supposed to have been carried off to immortality by a stork, which features in stories related to some of the other Immortals as well. (S)he is the patron of florists and gardeners and is often portrayed in slightly tattered dress, one foot shoeless.

**Cáo Guójiù** (曹国舅), the only nobleman in the group, is always portrayed in formal court dress, and is identifiable by his Song Dynasty official's scepter and/or castanets, which are not round like Western castanets but comprise two elongated flat pieces of wood or jade (Figs. [421](#), [423](#)). Purportedly he is the brother of a Song Dynasty empress, and his castanets are said "to be derived from the pass that gave him free access to the palace – a benefit of his rank."<sup>18</sup> He is also the patron of actors and actresses. Although he had an evil personality, he changed his ways and lived as a hermit, practicing Taoism until asked to join the group of Immortals by Lǚ Dòngbīn and Hàn Zhōnglí.

The story of how two of the Eight Immortals, Cáo Guójiù and Lán Cǎihé, became immortal is recorded in the classic novel *Journey to the West*.

Because representations of the Eight Immortals were often in sets of eight hanging scrolls or eight single statues or carvings, it is very common to find older isolated examples or singletons. As a result, any representation of a lone individual that displays the appropriate attributes can usually be positively identified as an Immortal.



Fig. 415 This beautiful porcelain bowl depicts all eight of the Immortals. Here Lǐ Tiěguǎi's gourd is emitting a potent medicinal vapor.



Fig. 416 The crutch and gourd design in this inlaid stone pavement in Shanghai is, of course, in memory of the Immortal Lǐ Tiěguǎi. Yú Garden.



Fig. 417 Hán Xiāngzǐ's flute identifies this Immortal, who is also the patron of musicians. Detail from a porcelain bowl.





Fig. 418 A little nicked and worn for wear, this is nevertheless clearly Hǎn Xiāngzǐ. Painted ceramic figure.

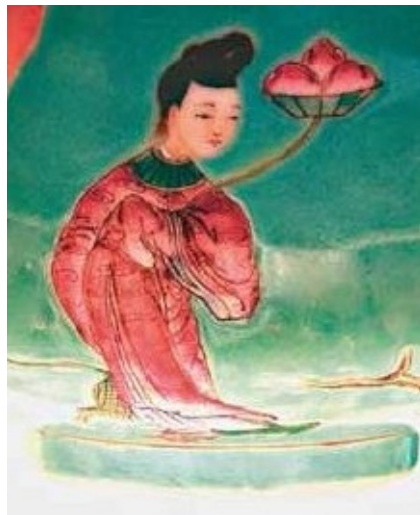


Fig. 419 The only true female in the group of Eight Immortals, Hé Xiānggū flies through the air seeking fruit for her mother, as a dutiful daughter. She is usually depicted holding a long-stemmed lotus or a peach, but also a fly whisk to symbolize her graceful nature. Detail from a porcelain bowl.



Fig. 420 Hé Xiānggū is credited with having been saved by Lǚ Dòngbīn and his powerful sword. Her chin rests on a lotus leaf, and her feminine beauty in the context of the group of eight ceramic figures identifies her as its sole female member.



Fig. 421 Cáo Guójiù crossing the sea on his “castanets,” calling to mind the story of “The Eight Immortals Cross the Sea.” Detail from a twentieth-century hand-painted scroll. Courtesy of Kari Bjaaland.



Fig. 422 A mysterious personage in every way, Lán Cǎihé is said to be a hermaphrodite, and is thus usually depicted as a young male/female, often holding a basket of flowers.



Fig. 423 Wearing court dress and carrying the elongated flat pieces of wood or jade that mark him as a court official, Cáo Guójiù is the patron of actors and actresses. Painted ceramic figure.



Fig. 424 Not every female holding a basket of flowers is Lán Cǎihé. This young woman is far too beautiful to be the androgynous Lán Cǎihé. The phoenix hair ornament and basket of peonies point to Yáng Guǐfēi (see p. [204](#)). Lychees were amongst her favorite foods. Packaged dried lychee cardboard box for retail market.



Fig. 425 Lán Cǎihé in a casual pose, but of which gender? Detail from a porcelain bowl.

## EIGHT IMMORTALS OF THE WINE CUP

Another well-known grouping of eight consists of eight popular Tang Dynasty (618–906) poets who are easily identified by the profusion of wine cups and bottles surrounding them (Fig. 426).<sup>19</sup> The most famous of the eight is Lǐ Bó (李白, 701–62), also known as the Poet Immortal (see p. 165), and regarded as one of the two greatest poets in Chinese history. The other is Dù Fǔ (杜甫). The subject of these eight poet drinkers came to appeal very much to the Japanese, and romantic renditions of the group remain a popular subject in Japan.

## SIXTEEN OR EIGHTEEN LUÓHÀN

(罗汉) See BUDDHIST DEITIES, p. 197.

## EIGHTEEN SCHOLARS

A large group of eighteen scholars reclining in a refined setting or mounted on horseback (fewer than eighteen may be portrayed, but the scholar's garb of flowing robes and winged caps is mandatory), typically in a pastoral setting of mountains and forests, is a tribute to the successful passing of the state examinations held to identify the most qualified candidates to staff the civil service. It thus represents promotion congratulations. The formal title of this theme is “Eighteen scholars advance to Yingzhou” (*shíbā jìnshì dēng Yíngzhōu* + 八进士登瀛洲). A *jìnshì* (进士) was a successful candidate in the highest state



examinations, the title one would acquire upon successfully ascending every level on the way to the top (as represented allegorically by the mountains). *Jìndēng* (進登) means “to be promoted.” *Yíngzhōu* is one of the fabled islands in the Eastern Sea where the Eight Immortals lived. The historical reference is to Lǐ Shì mín (李世民), who while a Qin prince (he later became the Tang Dynasty Emperor Tàizōng (太宗), r. 627–50) brought together the eighteen scholars who collectively became the founding members of the famous Hanlin Academy (翰林院).<sup>20</sup> Joining the academy was subsequently called “ascending *Yíngzhōu*.”

Such depictions of eighteen scholars came to be a fashionable theme in Chinese painting, sometimes in combination with the Four Arts of the Scholar (*qín qí shū huà* 琴棋書畫, music, chess, calligraphy, and painting). Sometimes eighteen cranes represented the eighteen scholars.<sup>21</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this book to identify the many scenes from Chinese literature depicted on porcelain, scrolls, etc. Most come from such classical Chinese novels as the Yuan Dynasty novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sānguó Yǎnyì* 三国演义) or the *Water Margin* (*Shuǐhǔ Zhuàn* 水滸傳). Make the next step in your study of Chinese symbolism the reading of these novels and Chinese history, with a search for famous scenes. You will not be disappointed!<sup>22</sup>



Fig. 426 *The Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup*, Soga Shohaku (Japanese), 1730–91, Edo Period, late 1700s. Pair of sixfold screens, ink and cut-gold foil on paper, 120 x 352.2 cm. © The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund 1976.11.1&2.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The first character (尉) can also be pronounced wèi, so there are additional name variants of Wèichí Jīngdé and Wèichí Gōng.
- <sup>2</sup> The morpheme qí means both “chess” (棋) and “very old” (耆).
- <sup>3</sup> Margaret Duda, *Four Centuries of Silver: Personal Adornment in the Qing Dynasty and After*, Singapore: Times Editions, 2002, pp. [36–7](#).
- <sup>4</sup> Michele Kriegman, “The Jews and the Chinese: Reaching for the Moon,” *Moment*, No. 10, 1995, pp. [32–3](#), referenced at <http://www.kriegman.com/essays/jews-eastasia.html>. C. A. S. Williams, in *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, 3rd edn, New York: Dover Publications, 1976, pp. 423–4, records “There is a legend of a wood-cutter watching two venerable sages playing Wei Ch’i in a mountain cave, and looking down eventually to find that his axe helve had rotted in its socket and his beard grown to his toes, so masterly was the strategy and so grim the determination of the opposing [players].”
- <sup>5</sup> See, for example, Duda, *Four Centuries of Silver*, Ch. 2, Pls. 2, 6, and 30, amongst others.
- <sup>6</sup> The seven members of the Zhúlín Qìxián (竹林七贤) are Ruǎ n Jí (阮籍), Xi Kāng (嵇康), Shān Tǎo (山涛), Xiàng Xiù (向秀), Liú Líng (劉伶), Wáng Róng (王戎), and Ruǎn Xián (阮咸).

- 7 Their imagery is still alive today. At the 50th Venice Biennale (2003), a Shanghai-based artist presented “The Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest, the first part of his new film pentalogy, ‘The Seven Intellectuals’.... The first Installment (shot in 35 mm B&W) begins the series’ exploration of the ambiguous position of intellectuals in contemporary China – their longing for individual freedom in the shifting context of an emerging capitalist economy.” Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *Artforum Magazine*, 2003.
- 8 *Ji ǔ Dé Sòng* (酒德颂), in John Minford and Joseph S. M. Lau (eds.) (trans. Richard Mather), *Classical Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Translations*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, pp. 271–2.
- 9 John Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Song China*, new edn, New York: State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 158.
- 10 Shawn Eichman, “Immortals of the Wine Cup: Religious Images on Seventeenth Century Chinese Porcelain,” *Orientations*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2003, p. 89.
- 11 Alternatively, Fānghú (方壺).
- 12 “Legend has it that in the ocean there were three celestial mountains, *Pénglái*, *Yíngzhōu* and *Fāngzhāng*, where celestial beings all lived in gorgeous pavilions and were in the possession of pills of immortality. Qinshihuang, who founded China’s first feudal dynasty, and Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, had dispatched trusted officials to search for the pills of immortality, but nothing came out of their efforts. In disappointment, the emperors began building celestial islands on waters close by their imperial palaces, thereby converting fantasy into reality. Beihai Park was exactly built according to this legend. The lake itself is reminiscent of the ocean, and the Qionghua Isle in its center is ‘Penglai’. The circular city on the southern bank is Yingzhou, and the Xishan Terrace is none other than Fangzhang. In the past both the Circular City and Fangzhang stood in the lake; it was not until the Ming Dynasty that they were linked with the shore of the lake.” [www.chinaplanner.com/gardens/imperialgarden/imp\\_behi.htm](http://www.chinaplanner.com/gardens/imperialgarden/imp_behi.htm).
- 13 “These burners were originally made out of ‘dead’ materials, such as bronze, terra-cotta, or porcelain (sometimes with gold inlay), and only later created out of natural rocks. Sometimes the latter even had living plants added to them. In the rooms of scholars, these objects were essential. The *bóshānlú* generally consisted of a bowl, which contained perfumed water representing the sea, and a high cover, sometimes with three levels or even nine, representing a mountain. The Daoist utopia as presented in these objects was not a gentle idyllic landscape, but one with formidably undulating slopes where an incongruous assortment of tigers, hydras, mountain goats, deer, birds, monkeys, and men are engaged in a never-ending chase or hunting scene. It has been suggested that this relentless zoomorphic pursuit was intended to be a visual metaphor for the perpetual force which motivates the cosmos. Sea monsters represented the ocean; tigers, the mountain. Climbing men who may be Immortals or virile elders appear occasionally.” [www.users.qwest.net/~rjbphx/BigPicture/Boshanlu.html](http://www.users.qwest.net/~rjbphx/BigPicture/Boshanlu.html)
- 14 A beautiful set of eight banners, each depicting one of the Eight Immortals, is shown in Claudia Brown, *Weaving China’s Past: The Amy S. Clague Collection of Chinese Textiles*, exhibition catalogue, Phoenix, Arizona: Phoenix Art Museum, 2000, pp. 92–9.
- 15 The Victoria & Albert Museum in London has a very attractive 5 inch (13 cm) high ivory figure of Zhōnglí Quán dating from ca. 1580–1640.
- 16 1 li = 0.5 kilometer 17 Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, p. 155.

- <sup>18</sup> San Diego Museum of Art, “Dragon Robe Terms” at <http://www.sdmart.org/dragonrobes/glossary.html>.
- <sup>19</sup> One of the most famous scrolls depicting this inebriated group is that painted by the fourteenth-century artist Zhāng Wū (张渥), reproduced in Paul Moss, *Between Heaven and Earth: Secular and Divine Figural Images in Chinese Paintings and Objects*, London: Sydney L. Moss, 1988. It is a copy of the lost original painted by Zhào Mèngfǔ (赵孟頫, 1254–1322).
- <sup>20</sup> The Emperor Tàizōng was not altogether a saint, however. He is also credited with participating in the plot that led to his brother’s death, who was the heir apparent, and forcing his father to abdicate in order to gain the throne for himself in 626. See Benjamin A. Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2000, p. [103](#).
- <sup>21</sup> [www.silkqin.com/02qnpu/12fmqp/fm24sbxs.htm](http://www.silkqin.com/02qnpu/12fmqp/fm24sbxs.htm)
- <sup>22</sup> A good starting point for depictions of some of the more popular secular and divine figures in Chinese art is Moss’s catalogue, *Between Heaven and Earth*.





Fig. 427 A famous stone carving of Bùdài (known as Hotai in Japanese) in a grotto along a pathway in the Temple of the Soul's Retreat (Língyǐnshì), Hangzhou.



## Chapter 10

# BUDDHIST DEITIES AND FIGURES

Buddhist art, iconography, and symbolism are both deceptively simple and highly complex due to the geographic spread of the religion and the many different schools of Buddhism that evolved over time (Fig. [428](#)). One can thus find many variations and deviations of not only the buddhas, but also their symbols, associations, etc. Furthermore, Buddhism borrowed much of its symbolism from India, where the various plants and animals had their own symbolism, which sometimes contrasts with that of the Chinese tradition. In Buddhist thought, for example, a pig represents ignorance – a shortfall not associated with it in Chinese thought. Tibet, while retaining two of the original four animals used by the Chinese to represent the four quadrants of the sky and directions (the green dragon and white tiger), replaced the black tortoise and red bird with the garuda bird (Fig. [429](#)) and the white snow lion (Fig. [430](#)), which as the local deity of Tibet's mountains has become the national symbol of Tibet.<sup>1</sup> Try to discern whether the statue or painting you are studying is more Indian, Himalayan, or Chinese in overall structure. Rich will be the rewards of your perseverance!

## THE HISTORICAL BUDDHA

All Buddhists recognize that there is only one historical **Buddha** (in Chinese, Fótuó, 佛陀), but different schools of Buddhism also believe in past and future buddhas (Fig. [431](#)). The historical Buddha, also widely known as **Sakyamuni** (which in transliterated Chinese is Shìjiāmóuní 释迦牟尼), is most easily recognized by his elongated ears (which are said to be reminders of his former life as a prince, when he wore heavy gold earrings), the short, tight, spiral-shaped curls of hair, the protuberance on top of his head (the *usnisa* symbolizing wisdom or supernatural insight), the raised dot (or mole, *urna*) on his forehead, his half-closed eyes, his benevolent expression, and his simple draped monk's robe to show his renunciation of the world (see Fig. [352](#)). The earliest images of the Buddha in Chinese art depict him seated in lotus position with his hands resting together in the traditional gesture of meditation (*dhyanamudra*),<sup>2</sup> or

standing, often with one hand in the position known as “quelling fear” (arm lifted, palm facing out towards the viewer), but the Buddha can also be depicted seated, (in Thailand) walking, or reclining on one side (but never, for example, kneeling).

The positions in which the Buddha’s hands are depicted, which are known as *mudra*, inform the knowledgeable viewer of the intent of the painting or statue and the episode or sentiment from the life of the Buddha that is being alluded to (Fig. [432](#)). Details of dress, position, and style give reference to the historic period of the statue or painting.



Fig. 428 Limestone stele depicting Buddha, Avalokiteshvara, and Maitreya. China, Eastern Wei Dynasty (534–50). Note the beribboned celestial beings and the stupa at the top. 84.5 x 47.7 cm. © Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.



Fig. 429 China’s Red Birth of the South has comparable manifestations in other Asian countries, for

example, in Tibet, by the Garuda (known as Khyung), which was said to have a human body but the wings and face and beak of an eagle. Originally the mount (*vahana*) of the Hindu god Vishnu, it was over time adopted into the Buddhist pantheon as a protector deity. Tibet also replaced the tortoise/snake of the north with the snow lion. Close-up of a statue of a garuda in the National Museum, Bangkok.



Fig. 430 Tibet's famous snow lion. Mural in a Yunnan temple.



Fig. 431 The Buddha, having lived lives of both luxury and deep asceticism and denial, seated in meditation on a rocky ledge with figures of seated and standing ascetics carved in deep relief beneath. His road to enlightenment followed neither extreme, but became known as the Middle Path. Here is one of the earliest depictions of the Buddha. Gray schist, second to third century ce. Height 107.5 cm. Courtesy of Mathew Welch.



Fig. 432 Sakyamuni Buddha signaling fearlessness with his right hand raised to shoulder height with the palm facing out (*abhayamudra*); and the gift-giving *mudra* with his left hand resting on his knee with the open palm facing outward (*varadamudra*). These *mudra* represent the spiritual power of the Buddha that will keep believers from doubt and fears, and the Buddha's pledge to aid them in their search for salvation.



Fig. 433 This small Gandharan Buddha head is one of the earliest renditions of the Buddha blending Indian, Greek, and Iranian characteristics. Note that the Buddha's hair is not in the classic short tight curls but long, wavy, and pulled back into a Greek-style chignon that gives the impression of an *usnisa*. Courtesy of Mathew Welch.

While not Chinese in origin, a group of sculptural buddhas known as **Gandharan Buddhas** often appear in Asian art collections, so they are worth mentioning here (Fig. [431](#), 433). Gandharan Buddhas are amongst the earliest

depictions of the Buddha in human form (first to sixth century CE), and as a result have been strongly affected by the Greek influences present in the Gandharan region where they first appeared, which includes modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan. These buddhas, which blend Indian, Greek, and Iranian characteristics, are notable for their wavy hair as opposed to the stylized tight curls that will appear later, and for their robes that more closely resemble the classical pleated Greek robes that cover both shoulders. Their faces are also uniquely Western, and although they bear the *urna* and *usnisha* of all buddhas, they lack the lengthy earlobes, uniquely curved eyebrows, and other identifying characteristics of later depictions of the Buddha.

Around the first century CE, a schism occurred in Buddhism that separated those who adhered to the original teachings of monastic study and renunciation of the material world as the means to enlightenment or *nirvana*, from those who believed in the ultimate salvation of all through the intervention of **bodhisattvas**. Bodhisattvas, sometimes referred to as the “saints of Buddhism,” are those spiritual beings who have reached the highest purified state possible before becoming buddhas themselves, and who have delayed their own enlightenment to help others. The original school became known as Theravada (also known as Hinayana) and the later development, Mahayana. It was the development of Mahayana Buddhism that created the wealth of buddhas and bodhisattvas found in Buddhist art today. Bodhisattvas are easily distinguishable from buddhas (who wear monastic robes) by their princely dress and jewels.

## FIVE DHYANI BUDDHAS

The evolution of Vajrayana, which added the deities and imagery of Hinduism and Tantrism, added more figures to the Buddhist pantheons. Its five major buddhas, known as the Five Dhyani Buddhas (Great Buddhas of Wisdom) or the Five Meditation Buddhas or the Five Enlightened Buddha families, were not historical figures but divine beings who symbolize universal divine principles or forces to meditate on. Each is associated with a specific color and direction, *mudra*, substance, season, time of day, as well as other attributes, to help us recognize them (it should be noted, however, that different tantric traditions result in variations of this table, the most common variation being a shift between the central and east positions of Vairocana and Akshobhya) (Fig. [434](#)). One of the most common places you will spot all five together is on the five-



panel ritual crowns or diadems seen in many Asian textile collections.

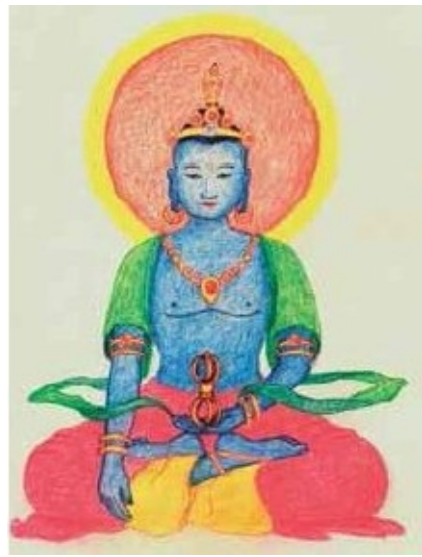


Fig. 434 Akshobhya, one of the Five Meditation Buddhas, was not an historical Buddha but is understood to be the visual representation of a divine principle, in this case representing the “all-encompassing wisdom of space.” He is thus bejeweled and identified by distinct characteristics, as are all the Dhyani Buddhas – blue skin, often seated on an elephant, and holding a *vajra*. Drawing courtesy of Sonja Bjaaland.

It was the Mongols who brought the influence of Vajrayana Buddhism (or Lamaism, as it is sometimes called) to the Chinese court during the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368); one of Vajrayana Buddhism’s most important converts was Kublai Khan. As a result, while most Chinese Buddhists belong to the Mahayana school (thus believing in a pantheon of buddhas and bodhisattvas), you will also find examples of Lamaist art. Visitors to Beijing can still visit a Lamaist temple in the heart of the capital, and visitors to southwest China’s Yunnan Province will find both historical and contemporary examples of Vajrayana Buddhism.

The study of Buddhist art and iconography will bring you infinite rewards. For example, understanding the colors associated with the “delusions” listed below explains what the worshipper should be seeing when he/she sees a multi-headed deity – each head a different color. The blue head represents the delusion of anger, the white, ignorance, etc.

There are, however, a number of buddhas and bodhisattvas that have enjoyed unusual popularity in Chinese art and these are recognizable with a little study. They can be identified by the animals they ride or sit on (referred to as their

“mount” or “vehicle,” *vahana* in Sanskrit), the objects they hold, and whether or not there is a small figure in their headdress or crown, which identifies the source of their spiritual power. The simple chart on page 188 outlines six of the most popular and easily recognized deities.

## BUDDHA OF THE FUTURE

The Buddha of the Future, the successor of Sakyamuni, known as **Maitreya** (in Chinese, Mílèfó 弥勒佛), is immediately identifiable by the small stupa he sometimes wears in his headdress as this feature is unique to him (Fig. [436](#)). Additionally, he wears jewelry and a crown. Although he often sits in a lotus position, he can be seated on a chair or throne in the distinctive posture known as the “European position” with both feet on the floor, a position most commonly identified with the historical Buddha. He is also shown seated resting on one leg, the other leg hanging pendant. At times he touches his face with his hand as though contemplating the future. Mílèfó is exceptional in the Buddhist pantheon in that he is both a buddha and a bodhisattva (one “waiting to be” a buddha, hence his splendid secular dress and ornaments).

### The Five Dhyani (or Meditation) Buddhas

Sanskrit Name	Amoghasiddhi	Ratnasambhava	Akshobhya	Amitabha	Vairocana
Title	"Infallible Success"	"Jewel-born"	"Imperturbable"	"Boundless Light"	"Resplendent"
Chinese Name	不空	宝生	阿闪如来	阿弥陀佛	大日如来
Pinyin Name	Bukong	Baosheng	Ashanrulai	Emitufo	Darirulai
Direction	north	south	east	west	center
Color	green	yellow	blue	red	white
Animal Throne	garuda	lion (or horse)	elephant	peacock	dragon (or lion)
Emblem	crossed <i>vajra</i> or sword	jewel	<i>vajra</i>	lotus	wheel
Mudra (hand position)	<i>abhaya</i>	<i>varada</i>	<i>bhumisparsha</i>	<i>dhyana</i>	<i>dharmachakra</i>
Element	air	earth	space	fire	water
Sense	touch	smell	sound	taste	sight
Aggregate	compositional	feeling	consciousness	perception	form

	factors				
Delusion	jealousy	pride	anger	attachment (including desire and passion	ignorance
Wisdom	all- accomplishing wisdom of air	equanimity of earth	all- encompassing wisdom of space	discriminating wisdom of fire	mirror-like wisdom of water

### The Six Most Popular and Recognizable Deities

	Sakyamuni	Maitreya	Amitabha	Avalokitesvara (Guanyin)	Manjusri	Samantabhadra
	Historical Buddha	Buddha of the Future	Buddha of the Western Paradise	Bodhisattva of Mercy and Compassion	Bodhisattva of Wisdom	Bodhisattva of Universal Wisdom
Most Common Position	lotus position with hands in meditation <i>mudra</i> or standing with "fearlessness" <i>mudra</i>	seated European style on a chair or throne	lotus position with hands in meditation <i>mudra</i>	seated or standing, never in the lotus position	seated on a white lion or lotus throne	seated on an elephant
Usually Holds	nothing, hands in various <i>mudra</i>			an infant or a vase containing a magic elixir or a willow branch	sword in right hand, lotus and/or books in left	jewel or a jewel on a lotus in left hand
Dress	simple monastic robe (details of the robe can help art historians date and identify the art)	bejeweled and crowned	simple monastic dress although in the Himalayas, beautiful robes and jewels	modest flowing robes, hair often partially covered by a headscarf	bejeweled and crowned	bejeweled and crowned
Associated Animals	none	none	peacock	none	white lion	single or multi- headed elephant
Headdress Contains	none, but swastika often found on chest	small stupa		tiny Buddha Amitabha		

### BUDDHA OF THE WESTERN PARADISE

As Sakyamuni and Maitreya's popularity waned in the early sixth century during the Six Dynasties Period (221–589), the popularity of the Buddha of the Western Paradise, **Amitabha** (in Chinese Nánmó 南無 or Ēmítuófó 阿彌陀佛),<sup>3</sup> rose, to peak during the Tang (618–906).<sup>4</sup> Worshippers of Amitabha seek release from the endless cycle of rebirths that constitute the Buddhist view of the world, hoping to be reborn in the Pure Land or Western Paradise of Amitabha.

Iconographically, Amitabha is often represented in forms also utilized by Maitreya and Sakyamuni, and thus is at times difficult to differentiate. He is usually portrayed seated in the lotus position with his hands on his lap in meditation, surrounded by scenes of the Western Paradise. He is often placed next to Sakyamuni in the main prayer hall of temples. When he is the main buddha in a prayer hall, he is generally accompanied by two bodhisattvas – Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, discussed above, and Guānyīn (see p. [201](#)).

## BODHISATTVA OF COMPASSION AND MERCY

**Guānyīn** (觀音), known in Sanskrit as Avalokitesvara, is discussed on p. [201](#). Although she is “an emanation of the Buddha Amitabha,” her popularity has moved her beyond the boundaries of Buddhism into greater importance as a Chinese goddess.<sup>5</sup> She is the most popularly portrayed female in Chinese art.

## BODHISATTVA OF WISDOM

**Manjusri**, known in Chinese as Wénshūshìlì (文殊師利) or simply Wénshū, is regarded as the Bodhisattva of Wisdom and Protector of Learning (Fig. [435](#)). He is usually regally seated on a mythical lion-dog or white lion or on a lotus throne wearing princely jewelry and a crown and brandishing a flaming sword in his right hand (to cut through ignorance) and the teachings *Prajnaparamita* (*The Perfection of Wisdom*) or the stem of a lotus in his left. Manjusri and Samantabhadra (see below) are considered the historical Buddha's most important disciples, whom some believe to have been historical personages. He has been associated with the holy mountain Wǔtái Shān (五台山, literally “five terraces mountain”), since the fourth century. Popular mythology includes sightings of him riding a blue lion in the mountains above the many temples that dot the area.



**Fig. 435 Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom and Protector of Learning, sits astride a white lion in this contemporary marble carving, his right hand resting on his knee clutching a string of devotional beads. Often mistaken as female due to his long hair, which is often tied up in several chignons, he is nevertheless male and associated with the Chinese sacred mountain Wǔtái Shān.**





Fig. 436 This Yuan Dynasty *thangka* of Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, shows him seated, biding his time, still a bodhisattva, waiting to appear. At his sides are Avalokitesvara and Padmapani. Bottom left is a yellow Jambhala holding a lemon, in the center Vaishravana, a god of wealth, and at right a black Jambhala with a mongoose. 72 cm high x 51 cm wide. Courtesy of the Chris Hall Collection Trust (on loan to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore).



Fig. 437 Samantabhadra sits astride his white elephant reading a sutra. He is best known in Buddhism for the ten vows he is said to have taken and for his association with one of the Sacred Mountains of China, Éméi Shān. Porcelain statue, height 17 cm width 16 cm.



Fig. 438 Samantabhadra, known in Chinese as Pǔxián, the Bodhisattva of Universal Virtue, seated on his elephant in the fourteenth-century Temple of the Azure Clouds, situated in the western hills, Beijing. Courtesy of Smitthi Siribhadra.

## BODHISATTVA OF UNIVERSAL VIRTUE

Known in Chinese as Pǔxián (普贤) and regarded as the Bodhisattva of Universal Virtue, **Samantabhadra** is usually seated, wearing princely jewels and a crown as all the bodhisattvas, on a multi-tusked white elephant (Figs. [437](#), [438](#)). The six tusks represent both the six senses that need to be overcome and the six “perfections” or *paramita* of correct behavior: charity, morality, patience, energy, meditation, and wisdom. His principal attribute is a sacred jewel which he typically holds in his left hand or which rests in a lotus in his left hand. In Sanskrit, *samanta* means “universally extending” and *bhadra* “great virtue.” He is best known in Buddhism for the ten vows he is said to have taken,<sup>[6](#)</sup> and for his association with Éméi Shān (峨眉山), the Buddhist mountain of the West.

## BUDDHA OF MEDICINE

Another well-known buddha is **Bhaisajyaguru**, the Buddha of Medicine (in Chinese Yàoshī 药师), who is usually shown seated with crossed legs, wearing simple monastic robes, and holding a medicine jar or the curative myrobalan fruit in the palm of his left hand.<sup>7</sup> His right hand is usually in a gift-giving *mudra*. Bhaisajyaguru was very popular during the Tang Dynasty, as it was believed he could cure disease, and even better, protect worshippers from the various illnesses and afflictions of the times. He is also known as the Buddha of the Eastern Paradise (in contrast with Amitabha, the Buddha of the Western Paradise), and because the color of this paradise is blue, he is sometimes blue in color. While fairly unknown in India and Southeast Asia, Bhaisajyaguru is popular in China, Tibet, and Japan. There are believed to be eight medicine buddhas, but if you see a figure described as above surrounded by seven lesser buddhas, you can be fairly certain of its identification.

## COSMIC BUDDHA

**Vairocana Buddha** (in Chinese Pílúzhēnà 毘卢遮那), the Cosmic Buddha or Universal Illuminator, is one of the Five Dhyani Buddhas (see p. [186](#)) and is usually depicted with representations of the sun and moon (Fig. [439](#)). Sometimes the joys of paradise are shown on his chest and the perils of the Buddhist hell on his back.<sup>8</sup> Usually located in the innermost part of a stupa or shrine, he represents the “universal” aspect of the historical Gautama and thus Buddhist doctrine.<sup>9</sup> He is also known as a Buddha of the Past. There is an esoteric sect that worships Vairocana under the name Dàirúlái (大曰如来) (Fig. [441](#)). He is often seated with Manjusri on his left, in the position of honor, and Samantabhadra on his right (Fig. [440](#)).





Fig. 439 Vairocana Buddha, known in Chinese as Pílúzhēnà, accompanied by Candraprabha, the bodhisattva who is holding a moon disk (月) to his right and Suryaphrabhasa, who is holding a sun disk (日) to his left. He is the Universal Illuminator and represents the “universal” aspect of the historical Gautama and thus Buddhist doctrine. From the Temple of the Soul’s Retreat (Língyǐ nshì), built in 326, Hangzhou.



Fig. 440 Vairocana Buddha is the central figure of this trio. Samantabhadra, who represents “ethics/perfect virtue,” is on his right and Manjusri, who represents “wisdom,” is on his left. Each sits on a lotus throne. From the Temple of the Soul’s Retreat, Hangzhou.



Fig. 441 Vairocana was once worshipped under the name Dàirúlái. This seated figure of Dàirúlái is from Hangzhou's Temple of the Soul's Retreat.

## BODHISATTVAS OF THE SUN AND MOON

Two easily identified bodhisattvas are **Suryaphrabhasa**, the Bodhisattva of the Sun, who holds a sun disk, and **Candraprabha**, the Bodhisattva of the Moon, who holds a crescent moon disk (see Fig. [439](#)).

## SAVIOR OF THE DAMNED

When standing, the bodhisattva **Kshitigarbha** (in Chinese, Dìzāng 地藏) usually holds the Buddhist jewel known as the Precious or Wish-granting Jewel (*rúyì bǎozhū* 如意宝珠) (see p. [228](#)) in his left hand and a long staff, a symbol of his love of the people, in his right (Fig. [443](#)). When seated, he can hold the jewel in his right hand. Such jewels usually represent riches in Chinese symbolism, but in Buddhism represent spiritual riches.

Dìzāng is the bodhisattva who has vowed to release all believers from hell before the Buddha of the Future, Maitreya, arrives, which has earned him the title Savior of the Damned.<sup>[10](#)</sup> Because of this association with hell in Chinese thought, he is often shown together with the ten kings or judges of hell, who preside over the ten courts of hell all sentient beings pass through before being reborn.

In China, Kshitigarbha is also recognized as the bodhisattva who protects travelers and children (Fig. [442](#)). He is especially associated with the sacred Buddhist mountain of the South, Jiǔ huā Shān (九华山), literally “the mountain of



the nine lotuses,” so-named after a poem by the famous Tang Dynasty poet Lǐ Bó, who compared the mountain’s nine peaks to lotus flowers. Because a famous Korean monk, Gim Kyokak, settled and died on Jiǔhuā Shān during the Tang Dynasty, images of the two figures (bodhisattva and monk) sometimes influence one another.

## FIGURES HOLDING MONGOoses

Figures holding mongooses, the most common being one of the Four Heavenly Kings, **Vaishravana** (see p. [194](#)), who is also known in Hinduism as **Kubera** or **Kuvera**, are generally associated with wealth. Vaishravana is also known in Buddhism as **Jambhala** because he also holds a lemon (a *jambhara*), symbolizing wealth, in one of his hands (see Fig. [437](#)). The mongooses, known in Sanskrit as *nakula*, spit out or “vomit” jewels, “symbolising the possession of wealth through victory”<sup>11</sup> (Fig. [444](#)). Kirtimukha (see Fig. [302](#)) are also depicted spitting out jewels.

## LAUGHING BUDDHA

The Buddhist figure perhaps most readily found today, thanks to its mass manufacture and popularity in such countries as Vietnam and China, is a very non-traditional, portly figure known as the Laughing Buddha, **Bùdài** (布袋, commonly transliterated as Putai or Hotei in Japanese) (Figs. [445](#), [446](#)).<sup>12</sup> Laughing, shaven-headed, pot-bellied, and typically surrounded by children, he holds a rosary in one hand while the other rests on a sack.

Bùdài is said to be “based on a monk by the name of Qìcǐ (契此), who lived in present-day Fenghua in Zhejiang Province during the Five Dynasties (907–960). He was held in high esteem by the local people ... [who] regarded Qìcǐ as the reincarnation of Maitreya.”<sup>13</sup> He is sometimes referred to as the “calico bag monk” because of his bag. One of the most famous Buddhist temples in China, the Língyǐnsì (灵隐寺) in Hangzhou, a few hours from Shanghai, is known for its representations of Bùdài (see Fig. [427](#)). (Because Bùdài is also the tobacco sellers’ special guardian, his figure is frequently seen in newsstands.) See also LUÓHÀN p. [197](#).



**Fig. 442 Kshitigarbha (Dizāng) dressed as a monk, holding the Precious Jewel in his right hand. Tang fragmentary torso. © Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.**



**Fig. 443 Kshitigarbha, seated on a lion, holding the Precious Jewel in his left hand and a long staff in his right, a symbol of his love of mankind. He is the bodhisattva who has vowed to save all believers from Hell before the Buddha of the Future arrives, earning him the title Savior of the Damned. From a cave in the Temple of the Azure Clouds, situated in the western hills, Beijing. Courtesy of Allison Wiktil.**



Fig. 444 Detail from a fresco in the Songzanlin Monastery, Zhongdian, Yunnan, of a mongoose being held by Kubera, a god of wealth.



Fig. 445 A porcelain statue of the Laughing Buddha wearing a colorful robe and clutching a string of prayer beads. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.



Fig. 446 The famous Laughing Buddha, Bùdài. Detail from a scroll. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.



Fig. 447 *Bodhidharma Crossing the Yangzi on a Reed*. China, Yuan Dynasty, 1279–1368. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 89.2 x 31.1 cm. © The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund 1964.44.

## MALE IN MONK’S ROBES BALANCED ON A REED

A lone male in monk’s robes balanced on a reed or reed leaf is the **Bodhidharma**, known simply as the transliterated **Dá Mó** 达摩 in China and as Daruma Daishi in Japan (Fig. [447](#)). A twenty-eighth generation disciple of Kasyapa, one of Sakyamuni’s original ten disciples, he is reputed to have brought the teachings of meditational or Chan Buddhism to China from India via Tibet around 520 CE. He is often depicted crossing the Yangzi River on a reed on his way to the Shaolin Monastery, where legend has him finding it in such a state of decline that he stayed to help revitalize it, making it forever famous. He is also depicted in more traditional positions, for example, the green-glazed stoneware statue of him dated 1484 in London’s Victoria & Albert Museum that shows him



seated, his hands tucked into the sleeves of his robe, a position that often helps identify him. Other distinguishing features are his dark bushy eyebrows, moustache, and beard.

## MAD MONK

Another popular monk, commonly known as the Mad Monk, is straightforwardly identified by his distinctive peaked cap and grin (Fig. [450](#)). He also carries a worn-out fan and a bottle gourd filled with wine (although monks were not supposed to eat meat or drink wine). **Jì Gōng** (济公), born in Zhejiang Province in the twelfth century, was initiated into the monkhood at Hangzhou's famous Língyīn Temple (which you can still visit today although it was originally built in 326 CE), but was eventually expelled from the monkhood for his outrageous behaviour, whereupon he took up a life of poverty helping the distressed and teaching people how to live virtuously. His fame was spread through a novel written in 1569 that recorded his good deeds, *Recorded Sayings*, which, together with a later published biography of his life, turned him into a popular figure. By the twentieth century, he was widely regarded as an "immortal" or even a "living buddha," and is today especially revered in his home province as well as by followers of Falun Gong. One of his most famous poems reads: "I wandered here and there, what a wretched life for sixty years, and now I have tidied up and returned, only to find the water and the sky are as blue as ever" (Fig. [451](#)).

## GUARDIAN DEITY

**Vajrapani**, a guardian deity of buddhas and Buddhism, represents the power of all the buddhas. Although found in much of the Buddhist world, he is most popular in Tibet, Bhutan, and other Himalayan countries, where he is represented as a fierce, well-muscled deity, often wearing a necklace of serpents and a skull crown, holding his symbol, the *vajra*, a "diamond thunderbolt" to represent spiritual power. (A *vajra* can best be described as an instrument that resembles a single-or doubleheaded metal baby rattle.) Sometimes Vajrapani embraces his female consort, Sujata, a name meaning "bringer of luck."

## DVARAPALA

The two warriors or gate guardians positioned at the main entrance of most Buddhist temples are traditionally known as **dvarapala** in Buddhism, but more colloquially in China as General Hng and General Hā. “One is portrayed with mouth open and the other with mouth closed, symbolizing exhaled and latent power.”<sup>14</sup> For this reason, they are known as *hng* (哼) and *hā* (哈) in Chinese as these words sound like the sounds they make. Together, they create the opposing forces and sacred sound of the cosmos, OM. As guardian spirits, they are often pictured holding a *vajra* (diamond thunderbolt), a symbol of their power that destroys enemies of Buddhism and is symbolic of the indestructible nature of Buddhism. Their traditional names are **Garbhavira** and **Vajravira**. Garbhavira, red when painted, stands to the right as one enters the temple. His companion Vajravira, green when painted, stands to the left. In Japan, they are known as the Nio, or Benevolent Kings, and the gate at which they stand is called the Nio-mon.





Figs. 448, 449 Tang Dynasty *sāncǎi* tomb guardians known in Chinese as Tiānwáng, each trampling an animal. Heights 84.5 and 80 cm. © Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.



**Fig. 450 Ji Gōng, the Mad Monk, sporting his distinctive peaked cap and wide grin. Expelled from monkhood for his outrageous behavior, he dedicated himself to helping poor and distressed people live virtuously. He is very popular today, especially in the Shanghai/Hangzhou area where he once lived. Wooden carved statue in the gift shop of Hangzhou's Língyǐ nshì.**



Fig. 451 A far more refined and sophisticated carving of Ji Gōng, carrying his worn fan and *húlú* gourd, presumably filled with wine. Courtesy of T'ang Horse Pte Ltd, Singapore.





Fig. 452 Known under a variety of names, these two Guardians of the East and West comprise two of the four Heavenly Kings who protect Buddhist sanctuaries and temples. The King of the East sports the Tibetan face color of white and plays a distinctive four-stringed lute, while his red-faced companion, the King of the West, holds a snake in his right hand. Ringa Monastery, Zhongdian, southwest China.

## FOUR GUARDIAN KINGS

Assisting the *dvarapala* are the four warrior kings who protect the Buddhist universe, the **Four Guardians** or **Lokapala of Buddhism**, known in Chinese as the **Four Heavenly Kings** (*sìdàtiānwáng* 四大天王) (Figs. [453](#), [454](#)). Originally Indian in origin, these fierce foreigners were adopted by Buddhism as sentinels to guard the Buddha against evil.<sup>15</sup> Although Buddhism had reached China as early as the second century, it only became popular during the Tang, when it began to be a visible influence in many elements of Chinese art. The Four Guardians were especially popular guarding Buddhist temples as well as tomb entrances, often accompanied by “earth spirits” (*zhèn mù shòu* 镇墓兽). One of the earliest representations of the Four Heavenly Kings is in one of the Dunhuang Caves (Cave 428) in Gansu, dating back to the later sixth century. Depictions of the Four Guardians also became popular decorations on funerary ware from the Tang Dynasty onwards, including boxes that once contained relics or scriptures. A beautiful gilt silver casket from the Tang depicting the Four Guardians can be seen in the Famen Monastery Museum in Fufeng, Shaanxi Province. It was once part of a set believed to hold the third finger bone of the Buddha himself.



Fig. 453 Guardians of the East (white face and lute) and South (black face and magic sword), Yunnan, southwest China.

The Four Guardians are still routinely positioned at Chinese and Buddhist temples, typically two on each side of the main entrance or one at each corner of a Buddhist altar (Figs. [453](#), [454](#)). At times they are painted on the walls as murals.

Easily identified by their armor and boots, each has his own magic weapon and associations. Sometimes their dark complexions confirm their foreign origins, while at other times their appearance is totally Chinese although they often display attire and postures that appear to be right off the nomadic plains. They are often depicted standing on a beast, such as a bull or deer, or sometimes crushing a demon underfoot (Fig. [452](#)).<sup>16</sup>



Fig. 454 Guardians of the West (red face and snakes) and North (white face and umbrella), Yunnan, southwest China.

Each is additionally associated with a specific direction and the Four Heraldic Animals of Chinese astronomy/astrology, as well as playing a more secular role in rural communities ensuring favorable weather for crops and peace throughout the land (*fēngtiáo yǔ shùn* 风调雨遍). The first two syllables of their names in Chinese, *móli* (魔力), means “one with supernatural powers,” although according to a Ming Dynasty novel, each king was a member of the Mó family, hence the common name.<sup>17</sup> The chart on page 195 lists their most common attributes for identification purposes, but be warned, there are variants.

Daoism has a similar grouping of four guardians to those found in Buddhism (see table p. [195](#)) who carry, respectively, a pagoda, a sword, two swords, and a spiked club. Very often in Chinese art, Daoist and Buddhist deities and guardians are depicted together.

Some buddhas stand on lotus bases. The traditional Buddhist lotus has eight petals, representing the Eightfold Path of Buddhism, whereas lotuses with four petals are Indian.<sup>18</sup> The colored lotuses that are painted on temple walls, etc. are associated with different buddhas. “The pink lotus ... is the lotus of the Historical Buddha.... The red lotus, shown fully open, represents the original nature of the heart and symbolizes love, compassion and passion. It is the lotus of Avalokiteshvara. The blue lotus, shown partially open, symbolizes wisdom,

knowledge and the victory of the spirit over the senses. It is the lotus of Manjushri and of Prajnaparamita, the embodiment of the perfection of wisdom.”<sup>19</sup>

### The Four Guardians

	Guardian of the East	Guardian of the West	Guardian of the North	Guardian of the South
Sanskrit Name	Dhrtarastra	Virupaksa	Vaishravana	Virudhaka
Chinese Names	Móliqīng (魔力清)	Mólihǎi (魔力海)	Mólishōu (魔力守)	Mólihóng (魔力红)
	Chíguótiān (持國天)	Guǎngmùtiān (廣目天)	Zēngchángtiān (多聞天)	Zengchangtian (增長天)
Color of Face in China	blue/green	white	black	red
Tibetan and SW China Variants	white face	red face	white face	green/black face
Carries	four-stringed lute ( <i>pípa</i> 琵琶) or sword	lasso or sutra, or two whips, a bag, and a snake, or a coiled dragon in or wrapped around his hand	umbrella or stupa and staff; holds a mongoose spitting jewels, rides a lion	spear or magic sword
Appearance	ferocious, copper beard	regal, thin moustache	heavily whiskered	ferocious, black whiskers
Season	spring	autumn	winter	summer
<i>Fēngtiáo yǔshùn</i> 风调雨顺	<i>tiáo</i>	<i>shùn</i>	<i>yu</i>	<i>fēng</i>

### GROUPINGS OF THREE

In Buddhist art, you will find many groupings of three figures including, but not limited to, **Sakyamuni** (the historical Buddha) together with his two most senior disciples, Ananda and Kasyapa (Ananda is always depicted as a young monk, whereas Kasyapa is older), a grouping identifiable by all three wearing simple monastic clothing (Fig. [455](#)); or Sakyamuni accompanied by two bodhisattvas, generally Avalokitesvara (in Chinese Guānyīn 关习习) and Mahasthamaprapta (the bodhisattva representing the Buddha-wisdom of Amitabha and known in Chinese as Dàshìzhì 大勢至); or Sakyamuni flanked by Manjusri (the Bodhisattva of Wisdom) and Samantabhadra (the Bodhisattva of Universal Benevolence) (Fig. [456](#)).



Fig. 455 Sakyamuni Buddha, seated on a lotus throne, with his two favourite disciples, Ananda and Kasyapa, at his side. Two crowned bodhisattvas, dressed in fine clothing and bejeweled, stand on lotus thrones in front of the monks. Before the throne, eight stands each hold one of the Eight Buddhist Symbols. Temple of the Azure Clouds, situated at the foot of the western hills, Beijing. Courtesy of Smitthi Siribhadra.





Fig. 456 The historical Buddha, Sakyamuni, is the central figure of this fifteenth to seventeenth-century *thangka*, identified above by his name in Chinese (Shìjiāmóunífo). Beside him are two monk disciples, perhaps Ananda and Kasyapa. Seated on their mounts, at bottom left is Samantabhadra, the Bodhisattva of Universal Virtue, and at right Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom and Protector of Learning. Notice the five-colored cloud swirls and the checkerboard base. Embroidered on silk gauze. 79 x 56 cm. Courtesy of the Chris Hall Collection Trust (on loan to the Asian Civilisations Museum,



Singapore).



Fig. 457 A Sui Dynasty stele of the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni, with his two disciples by his side, Ananda and Kasyapa.

**Ananda** (阿难) was said to be the historical Buddha's cousin who became a monk in the second year of the Buddha's ministry. His great memory made him indispensable as the oral repository of the Buddha's teachings, and it was his recollection of what the Buddha said, when and to whom, which became the basis of the Buddhist sutras (Fig. [457](#)). Another monk, Upali, recited by memory the commandments (or *vinaya*) from the Buddha's life and these too were discussed and agreed upon although neither were written down for hundreds of years until the first century BCE when inconsistencies began to appear in the oral tradition.

**Kasyapa** was the historical Buddha's immediate successor, leading the community of 500 monks and convening the first council on the first anniversary of the Buddha's death at which Ananda and Upali recited the Buddha's words.<sup>[20](#)</sup>

The Three Jewels of Buddhism (the Buddha, the *dharma*, and the *sangha*) are represented iconographically by a grouping known as the **Three Sages**: Sakyamuni (the historical Buddha), Vairocana (representing Buddhist doctrine, *dharma*), and Loshana (symbolizing the monastic community, the *sangha*).

Another common grouping is the **Three Perfect Buddhas** – Sakyamuni, Amitabha, and Maitreya. The left side is the dominant, more honored side in China, so this is also the more overriding of the two flank positions of the triad. Very occasionally, a bodhisattva rather than a buddha will occupy the central

position.<sup>21</sup>

Other common groupings include the **Seven Buddhas of the Past** and the five buddhas linked to the five directions.

Finally, there is a grouping known as the **1,000 Buddhas** (*qiānfó* 千佛), which is found in Chinese Buddhist paintings and sculpture as well as the monumental 1,000 Buddha caves of Dunhuang, built from 366 CE (Fig. 459).<sup>22</sup> The idea of 1,000 Buddhas is used to represent the belief that the Buddha and his teachings are all-pervading. Beautiful textiles exist with panels of buddhas representing this theme, which were probably used as hangings in monasteries or temples.<sup>23</sup> (See also the number 1,000 in LARGE NUMBERS p. 234.)

## LUÓHÀN

A collection of sixteen or eighteen figures found in the context of a Buddhist temple or monastery is most likely the **Sixteen** or **Eighteen Luóhàn** (罗汉) or *arhat* (Fig. 461). These were supposedly the original personal disciples of the Buddha, who because of their having attained enlightenment were freed from the cycle of reincarnation to act as “guardians of the law.”<sup>24</sup> Over time, the number increased from the original sixteen, as recorded in a book written approximately 800 years after the Buddha’s death by the Singhalese priest Nardimitra, to 500 (Fig. 458).<sup>25</sup>

“The earliest Chinese representations of Luohans can be traced to the 4th century, but it was not until after the 8th century that sinicized dragon-subduing, tiger-taming, or sea-crossing Luohans evolved, forming a new group known as the Eighteen Luohans. Over time, depictions of Luohans evolved from individualized to more formalized portraits.”<sup>26</sup> Depictions of the *luóhàn* reached their peak during the Tang Dynasty.

Their position varies in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, as Theravada Buddhism views these figures, having attained personal enlightenment, as less important than bodhisattvas, whereas Mahayana Buddhism sees them as sages, who, having attained enlightenment, are indistinguishable from buddhas. They are always represented as elderly monks with shaved heads, although each is identifiable through distinctive symbols.<sup>27</sup> Paintings and textiles meant for meditational or instructional purposes can be found featuring large groups of

*luóhàn*. The famous grouping, known as “500 *luóhàn* crossing the sea,” can be seen in the Lama Temple in Beijing. Kunming’s Bamboo Temple also features a collection of clay figures representing the 500 *Luóhàn*. There are many such groupings to be seen at the sacred Buddhist mountain Wǔtái Shān (五台山, “five terraces mountain”). *Luóhàn* are easy to identify after you have seen a few groupings, but remember that the group may have been represented by a series of scrolls or paintings depicting one to several *luóhàn*, so you will need to learn to recognize their individual characteristics. Perhaps the most famous of the 500 *Luóhàn* is the portly Laughing Buddha, Bùdài (布袋) (see p. [192](#)).

A white silk scarf draped over a branch or nearby item identifies a figure as that of a Buddhist *arhat*.<sup>[28](#)</sup> Sometimes one finds woodcuts or soapstone carvings of Daoist and other Chinese “saints” or gods – such as the God of Longevity – marked in the same way.

## APSARA

The lithesome, feminine celestial beings that appear as secondary figures in Buddhist paintings or as part of a Buddhist scene of paradise are known as *apsara* (in Chinese *tiānnǚ* 天女, “heavenly women” or *fēitiān* 飞天, “flying heaven”) (Fig. [460](#)). They are often depicted playing musical instruments or flying with two trailing ribbons, holding an instrument or a lotus, a symbol of Buddhism. Frequently their hands are held together in a gesture of prayer and adoration. They are also known as *xiāngyīnshén* (香音神), “sweet news spirits.” Perhaps the most famous *apsara* are those found in the Dunhuang Caves.



Fig. 458 The Temple of Azure Clouds on the outskirts of Beijing is most famous for its Hall of Bodhisattvas (or *luóhàn*), added to the original structure in 1748 under the reign of the Emperor Qianlong. It contains 500 Buddha statues. Note the swirling five-colored clouds. Courtesy of Smitthi Siribhadra.

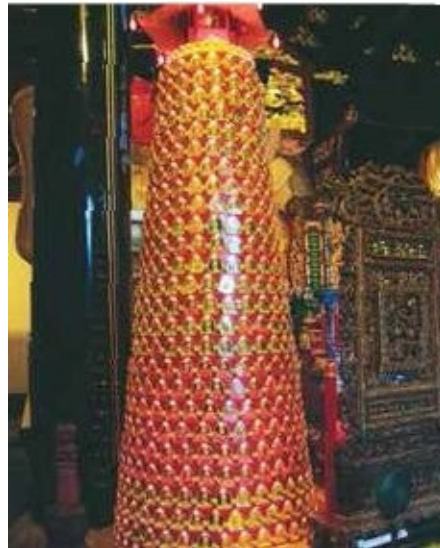


Fig. 459 A 1,000 Buddha pillar from the (new) City God Temple (*Chénghuángmiào*) in Shanghai, which replaced the original temple built during the Ming Dynasty in the fifteenth century. The pillar is to

remind worshippers that the Buddha is all-seeing and his teachings omnipresent.



Fig. 460 “Celestial beings” or *apsara*, generally known as “heavenly women” (*tiānnǚ*) in Chinese, often appear in paintings, carvings, and illustrations depicting buddhas or scenes from Buddhism. They frequently hold and/or play musical instruments. The streaming ribbons add to their beauty and the auspicious nature of the picture. Detail from a mural in the Temple of the Soul’s Retreat (Língyīnshì), Hangzhou.

Other more normal, albeit serene and respectful human figures found in Buddhist art tend to be stylized representations of the pious donors and patrons of the murals and paintings. It was a convention throughout Chinese history for patrons to have themselves included among those worshipping or in prayer amongst the devotees. Many such patrons can be recognized by their hands, which are often held high, palms together in worship and respect, in the direction of the Buddha. Buddhas and bodhisattvas are never portrayed in this position.

The subject of Buddhist iconography goes beyond the scope of this book, but for an excellent introduction to the subject and others concerning the symbolism of Buddhism, readers are referred to the Bibliography.





Fig. 461 A *famille rose* plaque depicting the Eighteen Luóhàn accompanied by two young servants. Note that each holds a distinctive symbol. One *luóhàn* is seated on a tiger while others are watching the dragon in the uppermost corner of the sky. 42 x 42 cm. Courtesy of Sotheby's.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The direction with which each is associated also changes – the dragon representing west, the tiger south, the garuda north, and the snow lion east.

<sup>2</sup> Hugo Munsterberg, *Chinese Buddhist Bronzes*, Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1967, p. [25](#).

<sup>3</sup> One sometimes sees Āmítuófó, but the correct Mandarin Chinese pronunciation is with an Ē.

<sup>4</sup> Munsterberg, *Chinese Buddhist Bronzes*, p. [33](#).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. [63](#).

<sup>6</sup> “In the Avatamsaka Sutra it is recorded that Bodhisattva Samantabhadra makes 10 great vows concerning his Buddhist practice which becomes the leading guidelines of all Bodhisattvas. They are: (1) To venerate all Buddhas; (2) To make praises to the infinite number of Buddhas; (3) To make offerings to Buddhas, the most meaningful offering is to practice the Buddhist teachings so as to benefit oneself and others; (4) To repent and reform all karmic hindrance, accumulated from our thoughts, words, or actions throughout our past reincarnations; (5) To rejoice and join others’ merit and virtue; (6) To pray that the Dharma wheel (Buddha’s teachings) will be turned (passed on); (7) To petition that the Buddhas remain in the world to benefit more people; (8) To always follow the Buddha’s path (teachings) in order to attain enlightenment; (9) To live harmoniously with all living beings – i.e., to respect all sorts of beings, and be as attentive to them as he would to his own parents or even to the Buddhas; (10) to reflect all accumulating merits and virtue back to all living beings for their salvation.

“The above ten vows conclude the combination of seeking enlightenment for themselves (the first eight vows) and saving others (the last two vows) by helping them attain enlightenment is typical of the vows of Bodhisattvas.” [www.manjushri.com/BUDDHA/Samantabhadra.html](http://www.manjushri.com/BUDDHA/Samantabhadra.html)

<sup>7</sup> Munsterberg, *Chinese Buddhist Bronzes*, p. [34](#). A myrobalan fruit is a lemon-like fruit believed to have curative powers.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> One of the most striking statues in the Longman Caves in Luoyang, China (Henan Province) is a 50 foot (15 meter) high statue of Vairocana. On the base is inscribed “Built by Emperor Gāozōng of Great Tang.”

<sup>10</sup> “Among the Buddhist manuscripts discovered at Dunhuang is a short Chinese apocryphon (*The Scripture of the Bodhisattva Dizang*) containing a paragraph that distinctly associates Dizang worship with rebirth in the pure land.” Shi Zhiru, “Dizang (Ksitigarbha) Belief and Pure Land Developments,” paper given in Lausanne, Switzerland, August 1999. <http://www.pitaka.ch/unil/shi.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, London: Serindia Publications, n.d., p. [180](#).

<sup>12</sup> The British Museum has a particularly attractive figure of Bùdài decorated in polychrome enamels, his head, chest, and belly left in unglazed biscuit. It dates from the Ming Dynasty, ca. 1484, and is one of the most popular pieces in the museum’s Hotung Gallery.

<sup>13</sup> Zheng Lixin (trans. Ling Yuan, ed. Sara Grimes), *Guide to Chinese Buddhism*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2004, p. [75](#).

<sup>14</sup> Munsterberg, *Chinese Buddhist Bronzes*, p. [119](#).

<sup>15</sup> There is a relief from the Great Stupa at Amaravati in the British Museum, which is one of the finest sculptures from Amaravati. If you look closely at the top right panel, you can see Maya, the mother of Prince Siddhartha (the future Buddha), attended by a servant and the Lokapalas, guardians of the four directions. They are in their original (Indian) form.

- [16](#) Robert Fisher identifies these guardians as evolving from the Indian *yaksha*, who represented power and abundance in Indian art as the *yaksha* represented fertility, “but their ferocious demeanour and martial attire derived from Central Asia ... although the continued presence of the writhing, gnome-like figures, being trampled beneath each of the lokapalas, recalls their pre-Buddhist, yaksha origins.” Robert E. Fisher, *Buddhist Art and Architecture*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1993, p. [106](#).
- [17](#) *Creation of the Gods* (*Fēngshén Yǎnyì* 封神演义), sometimes translated as *Canonization of the Gods*, is considered by many to be the best Chinese classic of mythical literature. It tells the story of the battle that resulted in the fall of the last emperor of the Shang Dynasty and the rise of the first emperor of the Zhou Dynasty. The gods of the Chinese pantheon were canonized from the fallen warriors of both sides of the conflict.
- [18](#) Munsterberg, *Chinese Buddhist Bronzes*, p. [32](#).
- [19](#) Meher McArthur, *Reading Buddhist Art: An Illustrated Guide to Buddhist Signs and Symbols*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002, p. [125](#).
- [20](#) For a beautiful carved wood head of Kasyapa emanating transcendental wisdom, visit the Shanghai Museum. The 253 feet (77 cm) high carving dates back to the Tang Dynasty. Their collection also has two matching stone statues of Kasyapa and Ananda, heads facing each other, dressed in simple monk’s robes. The main hall in Nanshan Temple on Mt Wutai (Wǔ tái Shān (五台山)) also features statues of Sakyamuni, Kasyapa, Ananda, the attendant bodhisattvas, and the eighteen *arhat*.
- [21](#) Munsterberg, *Chinese Buddhist Bronzes*, p. [125](#).
- [22](#) “Introduced into China by Dharmaraksa through his translation of the Bhadrakalpa Sutra.” Ibid., p. [59](#). The Shanghai Museum has a stone stele with this motif dating to the Northern Zhou (557–81).
- [23](#) Examples can be found in both the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Chris Hall Collection Trust.
- [24](#) In China, two Chinese disciples have been added to make the total number eighteen.
- [25](#) Soame Jenyns, *A Background to Chinese Painting*, New York: Schocken Books, 1966, p. [60](#).
- [26](#) *Guardians of the Law: Chinese Luohan Paintings*, exhibition catalogue, Freer Gallery of Art, 2004. Paul Moss, in *Between Heaven and Earth: Secular and Divine Figural Images in Chinese Paintings and Objects*, London: Sydney L. Moss, 1988, dates the “earliest dated Chinese representations of sixteen luohan ... to the sixteen paintings attributed to Kuan-hsiu (832–912) in the Imperial Household Museum, Tokyo, dated between 880 and 894.” Note to catalogue item #3.
- [27](#) See, for example, C. A. S. Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, 3rd edn, New York: Dover Publications, 1976, pp. [157](#) ff. or Warren Cox, *Chinese Ivory Sculpture*, New York, Bonanza Books, 1946, pp. [157](#) ff., for a detailed list combined with that of Antoinette Gordon, renowned iconographer of Buddhist figures.
- [28](#) Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, p. [99](#).





Fig. 462 The beautiful Tang Dynasty concubine Yáng Guǐfēi standing before a large peony bush. Contemporary scroll in a Shanghai shop.

## Chapter 11

# FEMALE FIGURES

While women clearly played a secondary role in traditional Chinese society, a number of them still achieved fame and recognition. Benevolent goddesses, beautiful immortals, mothers who gave birth to important sons, and historically virtuous or filial women are not surprisingly the most popular subjects, but an imperial concubine or two who has caused the loss of an empire has also managed to slip into the inventory of female figures portrayed in Chinese art.

The list below is arranged by the frequency with which these heroines are usually found, beginning with the best known of them all, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy and Compassion, Guānyīn.

### GUĀNYĪN, GODDESS OF MERCY AND COMPASSION

The most popular female figure to appear in Chinese art began life as a male, as the Indian and Himalayan god Avalokitesvara, but is known to the Chinese as the Buddhist Bodhisattva or Goddess of Mercy and Compassion, Guānyīn (观音).<sup>1</sup> Serene in beauty and bearing, always available to one in prayer, she was an especially popular figure during the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279), and continues to reign as Buddhism's and China's favorite goddess. In Japan, she is known as Kannon. Although she has 108 forms,<sup>2</sup> we only need know a few basic representations.

In her most popular (Chinese) manifestations, she is a gracious, mature woman of fair complexion, with an elegant face and features, dressed in modest, flowing white robes (Fig. [463](#)). In her right hand, Guānyīn usually holds a willow bough (a Chinese symbol of Buddhist virtues) or a horsetail fly whisk (a symbol of both grace and elegance, as well as a symbol of Buddhism's altruism, as a fly whisk was used to brush both insects and worldly thoughts aside and thus was a sign of spiritual leadership). In her left hand, she holds a vase from which she sprinkles the dew of immortality upon mankind to reduce its suffering. This vase is one of the defining characteristics by which iconographers identify her (Fig. [466](#)). She may also hold Buddhist prayer beads, and less frequently, a text, the *Lotus Sutra*, with which she is associated, or an actual lotus, a symbol of purity.



When holding a lotus, her Sanskrit name is Padmapani (*padma* meaning “lotus”). The tiny Buddha who sometimes appears in her headdress is Amitabha, the Buddha of the Western Paradise, with whom she is closely associated, as was Avalokitesvara (Fig. [465](#)).<sup>3</sup>

As Guānyīn’s popularity rose throughout China with the spread of Buddhism, she became associated in people’s minds with some of the ancient sea goddesses who were popular in the coastal regions. Thus, another popular portrayal features her as the protectress of the seas standing in swirling waters amidst leaping fish and frothing waves, the patron of fishermen and sailors (Fig. [466](#)). She is sometimes seen holding a fish basket (*yúlán* 鱼篮). According to Jacques Pinpaneau, the Chinese may have “adopted this accessory for Guanyin, [as it is] a homophone for the word for the *Yulanpan* [*Yúlánpénhuì*] festivity, the holiday for rescuing souls from hell...”<sup>4</sup>

Guānyīn is also regularly portrayed “Madonna-like” holding a young male child in her arms, a result of the influence pictures of the Madonna, brought to China by Catholic priests in the sixteenth century, had on the porcelain makers of Fujian. In this form she is known as the “protector and bearer of children” (in Chinese, Sòngzǐ 送子) and is the focus of prayers for women desiring male offspring. Guānyīn’s most sacred hill is Pútuóshān (普陀山), located on an island south of Shanghai in the mouth of the Yangzi River in Zhejiang Province. It is one of Buddhism’s four sacred mountains in China, and is often referred to as the “Buddhist kingdom on the sea.” Its importance dates back to the ninth century when a Japanese monk was trying to return to his home country with a statue of Guānyīn he had acquired while on a pilgrimage to Mt Wutai (Wǔtái Shān 五台山) in Shanxi Province. Just as his ship was leaving the harbor, a storm threatened, compelling the monk to pray to the goddess, “If the time is not ripe yet for this venerable statue to settle down on the eastern side of the sea, please allow me to leave it in this mountain.”<sup>5</sup> The storm subsided, the boat moved towards the island, and the statue and monk remained in China.



Fig. 463 A fine porcelain statue, albeit more matronly than usual, of the Goddess of Mercy, Guānyīn, with her left arm resting on a writing bench. A small image of the Buddha of the Western Paradise sits in her headdress. Height 34 cm. Purchased along Jakarta's once-famous antiques street, Jalan Surabaya, before it was destroyed in the 1998 riots.

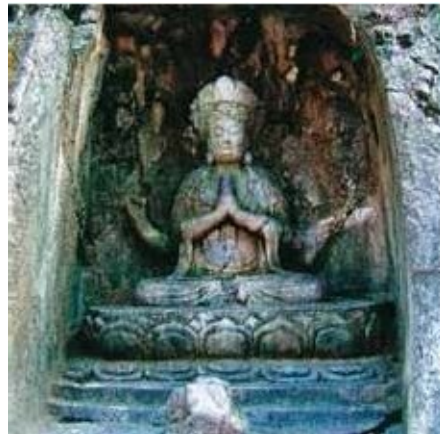


Fig. 464 This famous carving of the goddess Guānyīn with four arms, seated atop a lotus base in a grotto in the Temple of the Soul's Retreat (Língyīnshì), Hangzhou, dates back to the Yuan Dynasty. Her rear left hands is missing, but in her right (rear) hand she holds a string of Buddhist prayer beads. A sign at the site claims that it is a typical image of the Mi Sect, influenced by Tibetan Buddhism.



Fig. 465 A particularly delicate Déhuà (*blanc-de-chine*) presentation of Guānyīn, often referred to as the Protectress of Fishermen (note the swirling waves and sea foam at her feet). She is holding a *lingzhi* scepter in her left hand.

Armed with a variety of weapons to fight the evils of the world, Guānyīn is also the protectress of the world in its struggle against evil and ignorance. In this manifestation, she has “1,000 arms” (symbolizing the limitlessness of her power; see 1,000 p. [234](#)) that bear not only weapons, but some of her other symbols as well, such as the willow branch and prayer beads. Her “1,000 eyes” enable her to see the sufferings of all mankind.

Although Guānyīn is usually depicted standing so her full grace and beauty can be appreciated, she is also at times shown seated in the *maharajalilasana* or “royal ease” position characterized by a casually draped arm across the knee of a foot resting on her seat. As with other bodhisattvas, she is often depicted standing or seating on an eight-petaled lotus base. You can also find her riding on the back of various animals, the most popular being a tortoise (p. [106](#)), dragon (p. [121](#)), elephant (p. [128](#)), or lion (p. [135](#)). She is also associated with the beautiful and dignified peacock, whose tail “eyes,” according to legend, are her sign that she watches over the animal kingdom as its special benefactress.<sup>6</sup>

**MAYA**

The historical Buddha's mother, Maya, sometimes referred to as Mahamaya or Queen Maya, is portrayed in two traditional poses – one where she is reclining in slumber while a white elephant enters her side, the traditional story of her impregnation with the child destined to be the historical Buddha, and the other in which she is standing under a tree in Lumpini Park, near the city of Kapilavastu, holding the tree's branches while or shortly after giving birth to the Buddha (Fig. [467](#)). According to Buddhist scriptures, she dies seven days later. Although representations of the Buddha have almost always taken on some of the personal facial and physical features of the inhabitants of the countries where Buddhism was practiced, Maya is always Indian in appearance, often bare-breasted with only a cloth wrapped around her hips. Although images of Maya are not common in Chinese art, scenes such as the two described above are found in friezes or murals depicting the life of the Buddha.



Fig. 466 Guānyīn standing on the back of a fish, a sprig of willow in her right hand and a small bottle holding the dew of immortality in her left. Scroll. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

QUEEN MOTHER OF THE WEST



If a scene you are trying to identify contains a beautiful, mature goddess and attendants bearing trays of peaches, you are probably looking at the Daoist goddess known as the Queen Mother of the West (Xī Wángmǔ 西王母), also known as Wángmǔ Niángniáng, variously translated as Auntie (or Lady) Queen Mother or Queen Mother Goddess (王母娘娘) (Figs. [468](#), [469](#)). She is also referred to as Jīnmǔ, Golden Mother (金母) and Xī Lǎo, Granny of the West (西老), and reigns supreme as the most senior of all the female immortals. There is a male counterpart known as Dōng Wánggōng (东王公) or King Father of the East, who is sometimes portrayed with his consort,<sup>7</sup> but he is a very minor and unimportant figure, most likely conjured up only to toe the Confucian line that daughters be subservient to their fathers, wives to their husbands, and mothers to their adult sons.



Fig. 467 Buddha was the only child of King Suddodhana and Queen Mayadevi. Here Maya is holding onto the tree in Lumpini Park, under which she gave birth. According to Buddhist teachings, the infant immediately took seven steps with a lotus appearing in each shallow footprint. At the seventh step, he announced that this would be his last birth. Drawing courtesy of Sonja Bjaaland.

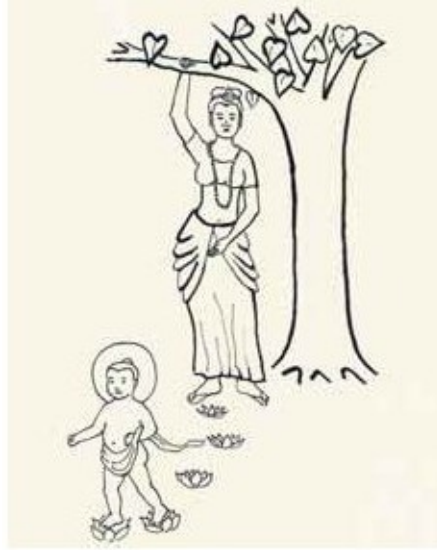


Fig. 468 Although almost overwhelmed by the Eight Immortals and other Daoist immortals, the star of this *kesi* is the figure in the upper right corner, the Queen Mother of the West, riding on the back of a phoenix bearing an armload of her peaches of immortality. The immortal with the large cranium is none other than the God of Longevity, Shòuxīng. Note the character *shòu* top center and the spotted deer. Courtesy of the Chris Hall Collection Trust (on loan to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore).



Fig. 469 Detail of Fig. 468 showing the Queen Mother.



Fig. 470 This modern Shanghai fan depicts a tipsy Yáng Guīfēi, the inscription on the left reading “Guīfēi zuìs ǎ.”

Residing in a beautiful palace on Jade Mountain in the sacred Kūnlún (昆侖) mountains (see MOUNTAINS p. [256](#)), the Queen Mother of the West celebrates her birthday on the third day of the third month of the Chinese lunar calendar by holding a large party to which she invites all the deities and Immortals to partake of the peaches of immortality (*pántáo* 蟠桃) that grow in her garden and ripen only once every 6,000 years. A popular rendition of this motif shows her on a bridge by her palace with a servant girl or page holding a feathery fan above her head, to show her royal status. The three gods of good fortune (Fú, Lù, and Shòu) and a Manchurian crane or deer, to symbolize longevity, may also be present. She is almost always accompanied by a phoenix (*fènghuáng* 鳳凰), which distinguishes her from the far more junior goddess Mágū, who is also depicted



with peaches and a spotted deer, but never in a palace setting.

Earlier depictions of Xī Wángmǔ show a very different sort of figure – quite wild and fearsome. During the Han, for example, she is often accompanied by a nine-tailed fox (*jiǔwěihú* 九尾狐),<sup>8</sup> and even earlier is shown with tiger's teeth and the tail of a leopard peaking out from under her gown. These correlate with the description given of her in the classic *Guideways through Mountains and Seas* (*Shānhǎijīng* 山海经), dating from the fourth to first century BCE, “which is probably the earliest surviving description of this goddess.”<sup>9</sup> At this time, she was also associated with disaster, disease, and punishment. It is clear from earlier texts that despite her more modern association with longevity peaches and fairies, she was originally a figure to be reckoned with. Her transformation into a beautiful and refined fairy queen seems to have taken place between the Warring States era and the Han, when it was believed that she held “control [over] various aspects of human life such as wealth, health, fertility and calamity.... [until] she became popularly known as the keeper of the elixir of immortality.”<sup>10</sup> Daoism's rise in the Wei and Jin Dynasties sealed her position as queen of the female immortals. It was Xī Wángmǔ who gave the elixir of immortality to Yì, the Archer, who then suffered the indignity of having it stolen by his wife, Cháng'é (see p. 206). Folk tradition also credits Xī Wángmǔ with being the mother of the Weaver (Zhīnǚ 织女), the star-crossed lover of the mortal Oxherd boy (see p. 207).

Modern depictions of Xī Wángmǔ in fantasy comic books and contemporary folk art, as well as more sophisticated paintings and textiles, generally show her either standing on her beautiful cloud-enshrouded pavilion or flying or riding through the air, at times on a phoenix or in a chariot, often accompanied by magical winged creatures, tigers and lions, a rabbit, or a three-legged bird.<sup>11</sup> The Queen Mother of the West is a very popular motif deemed especially appropriate on women's birthdays. Because her palace pavilion is located on the shores of the mythical Jasper Lake, a reference to someone's carriage “returning to Jasper Lake” was once used as a polite euphemism for the passing away of an elderly lady.

## YÁNG GUÌFÈI

Another favorite of Chinese artists is the Tang Dynasty concubine of the



Emperor Xuánzōng (r. 712–56), the beautiful young woman known as Yáng Yùhuán (杨玉环), also known as Yáng Guìfēi (杨贵妃)<sup>12</sup> or by her original given name, Yùhuán (玉环 Jade Bracelet) (see Fig. 462). Knowledge of her life and the events that feature in it are usually the keys to identifying her, although an inscription will often confirm a tentative identification. Having risen from humble origins to become the much-beloved companion of the infatuated emperor (he was sixty years to her twenty-six when they met),<sup>13</sup> she came to a tragic end when blamed for the kingdom's ills, including the famous rebellion known as the Ānshǐ Rebellion (安史之乱), led by the Turkish/Sogdian General Ān Lùshān (安禄山, 703–57), which contributed to the downfall of the Tang Dynasty.

She is often portrayed with peonies as she is said to have loved them so much that she asked the gods to allow them to bloom throughout the year. She was also said to be especially attractive riding horseback.<sup>14</sup> Her popularity with artists encourages viewers to assume, usually correctly, that any depiction of a beautiful young woman in Tang Dynasty dress on horseback or with peonies is likely to be Yáng Guìfēi. Interestingly, she is often described, and portrayed, as a little more plump than modern fashion would dictate. An amusing operatic story, *Yáng Guìfēi in Her Cups* (inebriated), has given rise to another portrayal of this famous beauty – that of a beautiful but drunk imperial concubine, which decorates at least one mediumsize Kāngxī Period bamboo brushpot.<sup>15</sup>

## FOUR BEAUTIES

**Yáng Guìfēi** is one of the four women known as the Four Beauties (*sì dà měinǚ* 四大美女) (Fig. 472). The other three are **Xī Shī** (西施), the daughter of a tea trader and a legendary beauty of the Spring and Autumn Period (seventh to sixth century BCE), who brought about the fall of the State of Wu (Fig. 471); **Diào Chán** (貂蝉) from the *Romance of Three Kingdoms*, whose face was legendarily so beautiful that it was said to make “the moon hide behind the clouds”; and **Wáng Zhāojūn** (王昭君), a concubine who was sent to marry the foreign ruler Hūhányé (呼韩邪) before the emperor discovered her true beauty. Xī Shī is often portrayed by a lake or river washing clothes, where it is said that “fish dipped in shame” at seeing her beauty. These beautiful women are popular subjects for modern scrolls and fans, which usually identify their subjects by name so you can match the text with the names given above.



Fig. 471 Xi Shi, one of the traditional Four Beauties of Chinese legends, painted on this modern fan from Shanghai.



Fig. 472 A stall outside Shanghai's popular Yu Garden sells modern moon-shaped fans of the Four Beauties and other famous Chinese figures from the Twelve Beauties of Jinling, the twelve leading heroines in the Chinese novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Moon-shaped fans appeared during the Song Dynasty and were particularly fashionable amongst court ladies.

## GODDESS OF THE MOON

The beautiful young woman ascending peacefully into a moon-dominated sky is **Cháng'é** (嫦娥), the Goddess of the Moon (Fig. [474](#)), who stole the elixir of immortality from her husband, Yì, the Archer, who had been given it by the Queen Mother of the West (Xī Wángmǔ 西王母). Cháng'é consumed it, then fled to dwell on the moon. She is also seen seated in her boudoir studying her image in a mirror held by a handmaiden accompanied by two children and a hare (that lives on the moon grinding the elixir of immortality).

The earliest recorded references to this story date back to the fifth century BCE, during the Warring States Period, to a divination book known as the *Guīcáng* (归藏, *Storehouse of All Things*). One of the more interesting finds from the Mawangdui tomb excavated in Changsha, Hunan Province, is a painted silk funeral banner dating back to the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE – CE 24). In the upper right-hand corner is a red sun with a bird. In the upper left-hand corner is a crescent moon with a toad and hare, and below, Cháng'é.<sup>16</sup> Her popularity has persisted. For example, the Victoria & Albert Museum in London has a beautiful

bronze mirror dating from 1550–1640 that shows the Emperor Xuánzōng's mythical visit to Cháng'é in her palace, where he hoped to be reunited with his beloved murdered concubine Guìfēi.<sup>17</sup> Cháng'é is commemorated during Zhōngqiūjié (中秋节), the Mid-Autumn or Moon Festival that occurs on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month (Fig. 473). One of the easiest places to find a picture of Cháng'é is on the cover of a traditional mooncake box, sold throughout the Chinese world during this festival.

In some versions of the tale of Cháng'é, she is transformed into an ugly toad as punishment for her actions. Han artifacts sometimes show a toad holding the pestle, grinding away, rather than a rabbit. Scholars now agree that the belief that there was a toad and a rabbit on the moon predate the Cháng'é story, but the creatures became confused and combined over time.<sup>18</sup> See also TOAD p. 104 and RABBIT p. 142.



Fig. 473 It is not certain who the central figure is on this Ming Dynasty embroidered badge, but it is most likely to be Cháng'é, Goddess of the Moon, flanked by two children and a number of the white hares that also live on the moon. She is commemorated on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, when this badge would have been worn. Courtesy of the Chris Hall Foundation Trust (on loan to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore).





Fig. 474 Modern papercut featuring the Goddess of the Moon, Cháng'é, who stole the elixir of immortality from her husband, consumed it, then fled to dwell on the moon. The rabbit who lives on the moon is at her feet bounding for home.

## MÁGŪ

Another popular figure is the Taoist goddess Mágū (麻姑), whose name literally means “Hemp Lady” (Fig. 475). Mágū is shown as a beautiful young woman, almost always accompanied by a fawn. She either carries a basket of life-granting peaches in her arms or a pole, from which a basket of peaches hangs. Sometimes a young servant boy carries the peaches. Her hair is usually worn in a chignon or bun, but a long strand may hang loosely down her back. Her fingernails are described as unusually long, even talon-like, and are said to give delectable back scratches (and are even referred to in classical Chinese poetry by the Tang poet Lǐ Bó). A drink of her famous elixir was said to bestow perpetual youth and longevity on its recipients.<sup>19</sup>

A portrait of Mágū and her fawn was a very popular birthday motif with women in Imperial China because she was associated with both beauty and longevity. Decorated porcelain in the world’s museums testifies to this. Today, you will still find pictures of Mágū in the classic arrangement known as “Magu bestows longevity” (*Mágūshàngshòu* 麻姑上寿), but some have reduced the length of her fingernails. “The immortal Magu and her fawn is [still] a popular image in



China, and her likeness is often given to married couples on auspicious occasions such as their silver or golden wedding anniversaries.”

## HUĀ MÙLÁN

A common sculpture or painting of a woman warrior is that of the beautiful, filial daughter Huā Mùlán (花木兰), who joined the army disguised as a man in order to replace her aged father and save her family’s honor (Fig. [476](#)). As she was popularized in a full-length Disney feature cartoon, most readers will know that she is usually dressed in full warrior garb, complete with helmet, seated astride a fierce-looking steed. For twelve years, she courageously protected her homeland, even advancing to the title of general before her true identity was revealed. Huā Mùlán today is a symbol of filial piety and patriotism. See p. [19](#) and HORSE p. [132](#).

## DÀIYÙ

A hoe and basket of fallen flowers identify the grieving Lín Dàiyù (林黛玉), usually referred to as Dàiyù, a popular tragic heroine from the famous eighteenth-century Chinese novel *A Dream of Red Mansions* (*Hónglóumèng* 红楼梦, also known as *Dream of the Red Chamber*). The young orphaned heroine was in such deep sorrow over the loss of her lover, that she took pity even upon falling blossoms. One day, she gathered them up to bury them properly in a tomb, in a scene known as *Dàiyù zàng huā* (黛玉葬花 “Daiyu buries the flowers”). As a result, Dàiyù burying flowers was a very fashionable motif on flower vases. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Dàiyù dies young as her lover is tricked into marrying another woman. What makes this story so fascinating is that readers learn that in a previous life Dàiyù had been a plant watered by her closeness to her lover, who was a rock/jade. Therefore, in this life it was only fitting for Dàiyù to water her lover with her own tears.

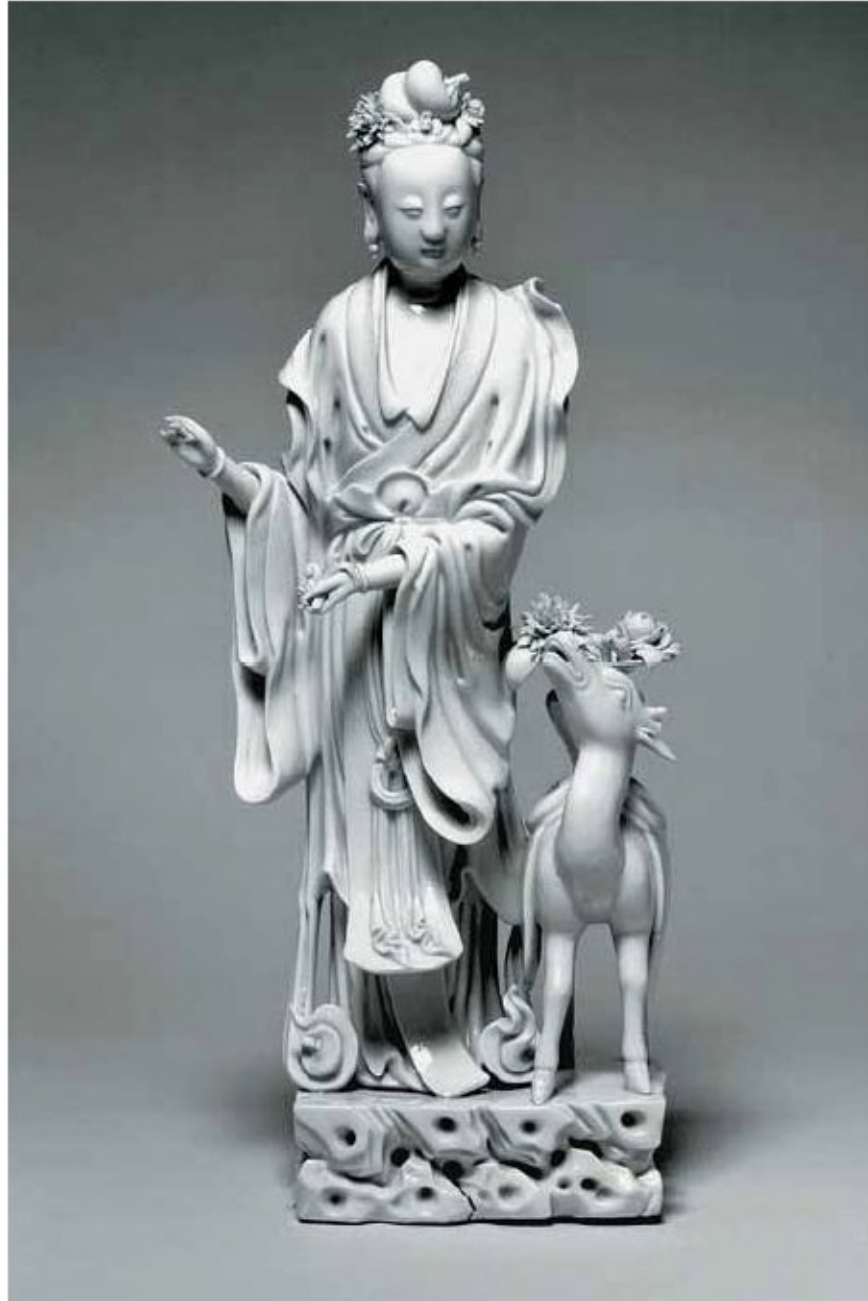


Fig. 475 The Immortal Mágū with a deer. Su Xuejin (1869– 1919). Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. There is also a delightful picture of Mágū with a cart being pulled by a spotted deer (spotted deer symbolize longevity), with three red bats flying overhead, in the Art Institute of Chicago's collection.

## ZHĪNŪ

A young woman sitting by a loom or standing on one side of a bridge looking

longingly at a young man with two children on the other side is Zhīnǚ (织女), also known as the Weaver (Fig. 478). She is the daughter of Xī Wángmǔ, queen Mother of the West and the Queen of all the female immortals. Zhīnǚ was the young fairy maiden who made the mistake of falling in love, marrying, and begetting children with a mortal, Niúlán (牛郎), the Oxherd. Separated by the gods who forbid relationships between mortals and immortals (some story variations claim that it caused her to neglect her heavenly weaving), they are allowed to meet only once a year on the seventh day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar (see SEVEN p. 228). Her lover is usually shown leading an ox or standing by oxen, holding or carrying his twin children in wicker baskets on a pole on his shoulder, as they were left motherless when Zhīnǚ was swept back to heaven by her angry mother.



Fig. 476 A statue of the virtuous daughter Huā Mùlán, who became a warrior general to save her aged father and family's honor. It is one of the eight Chinese Legendary Hero statues in Singapore's Marina City Park donated by Tee Yih Jia Food Manufacturing Pte Ltd.

The following poem is from the Han Dynasty:

Far away twinkles the Herd-boy star  
Brightly shines the Lady of the Han River  
Slender, slender she plies her white fingers  
Click, click to the wheel of her spinning loom.  
At the end of the day she has not finished her task.  
Her bitter tears fall like streaming rain  
The Han River runs shallow and clear

Set between them, how short a space!  
But the river water will not let them pass,  
Gazing at each other, but never able to speak.<sup>20</sup>

As a weaver, Zhīnǚ is the patron saint of women's work, and displays of sets (in sevens) of cosmetics, bowls of fruit, sewing articles, etc. characterize the women's gatherings that mark this day. On the evening of the actual festival, women used to pray to heaven for help in improving their needlework (see p. [153](#)).



Fig. 477 The Nymph of the River Luo, Luò Shén, was the daughter of an ancient emperor who drowned herself and turned into a nymph. She became famous due to a poem describing her beauty attributed to the Three Kingdoms Period (CE 220–65). She is a popular figure for artists although here she decorates a tourist cruise ship in Singapore.

## LÁN CǎIHÉ

Lán Cǎihé (蓝采和), despite his feminine appearance and clothing, is probably an hermaphrodite, but is included in this chapter to help you identify him. He is one of the eight members of the group known as the Eight Immortals (see p. [176](#)), and seldom appears apart from the group or a subdivision of the group. He can be identified by the basket of flowers or fruit he carries, all symbols of longevity as befits an immortal. The sole female member of the Eight Immortals is Hé Xiāngū.

## HÉ XIĀNGŪ

Hé Xiāngū (何仙姑) is easily recognizable as the only female in the group of Eight

Immortals (p. [176](#)). Immortal since the age of fourteen, as a result of a diet of powdered mica and little more, she flies through the air collecting fruit for her mother and is usually depicted with a lotus, which is her symbol.

## XIĀNG FŪREN

If a painting or sculpture portrays a beautiful young woman standing or sailing on a barge across a sea being approached by a handsome young man on a dragon boat, you are looking at the water nymph Xiāng Fūren (湘夫人) and her would-be lover, Xiāng Jūn (湘君), the God of the Xiāng River in Hunan Province, which was a tributary of the Yangzi. Their watery romance is a favorite theme amongst ivory carvers. Xiāng Fūren was commemorated in a poem from a work called *Nine Songs* (*Jiǔ Gē* 九歌 attributed to Qū Yuán (see p. [168](#)))

## LUÒ SHÉN

A beautiful young sea nymph being driven through the clouds in a ribbon-bedecked chariot drawn by six dragons escorted by sea birds, often with her head turned slightly looking over her shoulder, is the Goddess of the Luo River or Luò Shén (洛神) (Fig. [477](#)). A mythical figure reputed to be the daughter of an ancient emperor, she drowned in the Luo River that runs through Shaanxi and Henan Provinces, and turned into a nymph. Her beauty is described as being so subtle and graceful, so captivating and rare, that she has long been a favorite of Chinese artists attempting to portray unsurpassable female beauty.





Fig. 478 The Weaver, also known as the Weaving Maiden, Zhīn ǚ, perhaps waiting for the one day of the year when she is allowed to reunite with her mortal husband, Oxherd Boy. Contemporary papercut.

## TWELVE BEAUTIES OF JINLING

The Twelve Beauties of Jinling refers to the twelve leading heroines in the Chinese novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*. They are often depicted alone or in scenes from the novel, and are so common that one author has gone so far as to say that “it may be safe to say, when you see an old-style painting or sculpture with one or more beauties in a garden setting, there is a fair chance that it represents an episode from *A Dream of Red Mansions*.”<sup>21</sup> The most famous is Lín Dàiyù (林黛玉), who has already been described above (see p. [207](#)). Other great novels have their own well-known heroines and scenes (Fig. [479](#)).



Fig. 479 A papercut depicting a scene from the Chinese novel *Romance of the Western Chamber* showing the heroine, Cui Yingying, reading a letter from Zhang Sheng, her lover, while her maid Hongniang looks on.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Guānyīn is the Chinese transformation of the Indian male deity Avalokitesvara, whose gender changed as he moved east. His iconographic transformation in China from male to female is dated to the Tang Dynasty, and while a fascinating topic, has to be left to the reader's own research.
- <sup>2</sup> The number of "earthly worries" in traditional Buddhism is 108. For this reason, Chinese court rosaries consisted of 108 beads, each "allud[ing] to the 'spelling out of the 108 earthly worries' in the Buddhist monk's daily bell-striking ceremony." See *Costumes of the Ch'ing Dynasty: A Display of the Beauty of Embroidery*, Taipei, Taiwan: National Museum of History, 1988, p. [17](#).
- <sup>3</sup> One of Avalokitesvara's representations features multiple arms and eleven heads, the topmost in the image of Amitabha, the compassionate Buddha of Boundless Light (see p. [188](#)) in accordance with the Himalayan legend in which Avalokitesvara's head was replaced with eleven substitutes by Amitabha after it burst upon seeing all the misery in the world. Avalokitesvara thus represents the compassion of Amitabha, as does his Chinese alternate, Guānyīn.
- <sup>4</sup> Yúlánpénhuì (盂兰盆会) is the Buddhist name for the Ghost Festival held on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month. Estelle Niklès, "Comme un poisson dans l'eau," *Collections Baur, Bulletin* 63, juin 2001, p. [45](#). The fish basket might also be a simple symbol of prosperity, as fish used in this context are a well-recognized pun in Chinese art.
- <sup>5</sup> Zheng Lixin (trans. Ling Yuan, ed. Sara Grimes), *Guide to Chinese Buddhism*, Beijing: Foreign Languages

Press, 2004, p. [150](#).

[6](#) Martin Palmer and Jay Ramsay, with Man-Ho Kwok, *Kuan Yin: Myths and Prophecies of the Chinese Goddess of Compassion*, London: Thorsons, 1995, pp. [61](#) ff.

[7](#) See, for example, the Han Dynasty bronze mirror in the Art Institute of Chicago's collection.

[8](#) According to the *Debates in the White Tiger Hall*, "the fox's nine tails symbolise abundant progeny." See Richard E. Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways through Mountains and Seas*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, p. [89](#).

[9](#) Ibid., p. [109](#).

[10](#) Yang Lihui and Deming An, with Jessica Anderson Turner, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology, Handbooks of World Mythology*, Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2005, p. [219](#).

[11](#) Visitors to Dunhuang should look for her in Cave 249. There are many temples dedicated to Xī Wángmǔ but perhaps the most famous is the temple in Jingchuan County, Gansu Province, that dates back 1,000 years and still holds festivities to honor the goddess on the third day of the third lunar month and the eighteenth day of the seventh lunar month. See Yang and An, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology*, pp. [223-4](#).

[12](#) *Guìfēi* was the designation of a first-class (or the highest ranking) concubine.

[13](#) She was one of his son's wives.

[14](#) One of the most famous paintings of Yáng Guìfēi shows her mounting a horse. This scroll, currently hanging in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington DC, is by Qiánxuǎn (known in Wade-Giles as Ch'ien Hsüan 钱选, 1235–1300).

[15](#) Paul Moss, *Between Heaven and Earth: Secular and Divine Figural Images in Chinese Paintings and Objects*, London: Sydney L. Moss, 1988, Item #23.

[16](#) "China Through a Lens." <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2002/jul/37121.htm>.

[17](#) Visitors to the Victoria & Albert Museum in London searching for this item need to know that the mirror is identified using the emperor's popular name, Míng Huáng ("Brilliant Emperor").

[18](#) See, for example, Yang and An, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology*, pp. [86-91](#).

[19](#) There is a herbal remedy still sold in China today known as Mágū's Treasure<sup>TM</sup>.

[20](#) Arthur Waley (trans.), *Chinese Poems: Selected from 170 Chinese Poems, More Translations from the Chinese, The Temple, and The Book of Songs*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1956.

[21](#) Li Nianpei, *Old Tales of China: A Book to a Better Understanding of China's Stage, Cinema, Arts and Crafts*, Singapore: Graham Brash, 1987.





Fig. 480 Drawing of a moon flask decorated with the *bógǔ* motif, a collection of “ancient things” – scrolls, vase with lotus and halberd, an incense burner, ancient bronzes, etc. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

PART III INANIMATE  
OBJECTS



## Chapter 12

# BORDERS AND OTHER REPEATED PATTERNS

Border patterns or repeating units of design, known technically as diapers, are very common in Chinese art on textiles, ceramics, furniture, metalwork, and architectural features. Many of these stylized, sometimes geometric, patterns have ancient symbolic roots and repeat designs found on sacrificial bronze vessels and implements of China's ancient past, such as dots, lines, trapezoids, and spirals. Others have mythological or symbolic roots that relate to ancestor worship and the worship of heaven and earth, such as stylized fish, plants, fruit, and blossoms.

## LEAF

One of the oldest patterns found on Chinese textiles is a simple leaf pattern known as *shùyè* (树叶). “Woolen examples decorated with this motif were discovered as early as the first century BCE to second century CE at Sampula in Xinjiang.”<sup>1</sup> The leaf is shown flat and somewhat heart-shaped, tightly lined up side by side with others of its kind in neat rows. The rows of leaves can vary in color – brown leaves on a beige background stripe, followed by a similar row on a black background stripe, etc. This pattern is found well into the Northern Dynasties Period (386–581). Textiles from this period are rare but fragments can be seen in Hangzhou's Silk Museum, the Chris Hall Collection, and elsewhere. Another pattern dating from this period comprises simple stylized rows of birds and flowers.

## CLOUDS OR CLOUDS AND THUNDER

Clouds or clouds and thunder are one of the oldest Chinese designs and link even the most recent pieces of Chinese art with the culture's agricultural roots

(Fig. [481](#)). The cloud and thunder pattern, known as *yúnléiwén* 云雷纹), consists of juxtaposed squared-off spirals, and can be found on bronzes and textiles dating back to the Shang (1523–1028 BCE) and Zhou (1027– 256 BCE) Dynasties<sup>2</sup> (see Fig. [490](#)).



Fig. 481 The popularity of the simple key fret border of repeating rectangular spirals, known as *huí wén*, can be seen in this Dali rug shop. Nearly every mule carpet incorporates the border.

Early thunder borders resemble small curlicues (“question marks” minus the dots) or spirals. During the Shang, they appeared primarily in distinct and separate pairs, but later were squared off, joined together, and made more elaborate in a pattern that is sometimes referred to as a “meander” or a helix. See also Fig. [483](#).

Be warned, however, that while “early depictions of clouds were achieved by adding small curls and scrolls to long-used geometric designs,”<sup>3</sup> later renditions have taken on so many frills that they can resemble flowers or mushroom/fungus heads and are difficult to distinguish from other designs except by color and position. Even using colors as a guide can be confusing as clouds are often rainbow-hued to make them auspicious (“five-colored clouds,” see p. [249](#)). When in doubt, look for stems and tendrils to differentiate floral patterns from clouds.

Clouds may have inspired **wave** patterns. Still water is depicted by broader, regular brush strokes in rounded shapes. Waves were drawn by pyramid-shaped lines made identifiable by the sprays of foam at the top. On the hem and cuffs of the famous “dragon robes” worn by members of the imperial court, the waves eventually became highly stylized, evolving over time into the precise multicolored parallel lines topped with waves and sea foam of the late Qing known as “standing water” (*lìshuǐ* 立水), as opposed to “flat water” (*píngshuǐ* 平水), which depicts only the surface of the water. Waves signal the distinction

between the human world and the legendary Three Isles of the Immortals, shown as three peaks in the hem design, populated with the Eight Immortals (see p. [176](#)), cranes and deer, immortality fungus, etc. Sometimes these waves are full of “treasures,” such as the Eight Treasures (see p. [228](#)), in which case the pattern is known as *bābǎo lìshuǐ* (八宝立水).

## RÚYÌ

*Rúyì* (如意) “fungus” borders are often mistaken for clouds, from which they may have been inspired,<sup>4</sup> and sometimes bats, due to the stylized three curves of the design (Fig. [482](#)). Many even appear as flowering vines. This S-shaped fungus design is a homophone for the expression “as you like” or “as one wishes” and is a common border pattern surrounding a central design consisting of auspicious symbols related to longevity, descendants, rank, success, etc. The expression first appeared in the time of the Six Dynasties (220–589), after which it seems to have acquired its popularity as a decorative design. See Figs. [229](#), [360](#), [483](#).



Fig. 482 A row of *rúyì* heads formed from the vines and tendrils of the lotus decorate the top of a large fish pot.

## DRAGON

Dragon borders consist of repeats of archaic dragon forms, sometimes combined with other symbols (see the archaic dragons in Figs. [250](#), [251](#)). There are several different styles, some more angular, others more curvy and sinuous.

## TÀOTIÈ

The ancient design popularly known as *tāotiè* (饕餮) is a highly stylized rendition of what appears to be an animal’s face, resembling those of bulls, sheep, and tigers (see *tāotiè* p. [144](#)). Its use as a border pattern was copied in later dynasties on ceramic jars and other vessels.

## PLANTAIN LEAF

Another popular border found on ceramics is the plantain leaf design known as *jiāoyèwén* (蕉叶纹) (Fig. [483](#)). These large leaves are used either on the vase's bottom or neck, although they are also found on the shoulder, filling in spaces between other, more important designs. They were “first carved on Ding, Longquan and Jingdezhen wares of the Song Dynasty and later painted on porcelains of the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties.”<sup>5</sup> Because the shape and nature of the leaves varied from dynasty to dynasty, they are helpful in dating ceramics.

## RHOMBUS AND LOZENGE

Another common filler pattern consists of pairs or a series of overlapping rhombuses or lozenges (*fāngshèng* (方胜) (Fig. [484](#)), known as *fāngshèngwén* (方胜纹). *Wén* means “pattern.” Considered lucky, its origin remains obscure. One theory is that the shape is taken from an ancient head-dress once worn to symbolize victory. For example, it was believed to be worn by the Queen Mother of the West (see p. [203](#)) to exorcise evil spirits.<sup>6</sup> Lozenges are one of the Eight Precious Things (see p. [228](#)) and are especially popular on textiles.



Fig. 483 This tall blue-and-white vase or beaker, with its bulging belly and flaring mouth, has a number of traditional borders and patterns. At the very top we can discern a classic border of *rúyì* heads, then come the tall vertical plantain leaves that comprise a border known as the “plantain leaf design” (*jiāoyèwén*). Below, and just sitting on the slight ridge, is a classic scroll border known as a *juǎn cǎo wén*. Directly below is a row of repeating rectangular spirals often referred to as a “meander,” the basic “key fret” pattern (*huí wén*). Below that, on the shoulder, is a peony border. The main motif is, of course, a phoenix with a piece of the fungus of immortality in its mouth. The patterns are then repeated – a scroll border, another key fret pattern, another row of peonies, *rúyì*, and at the base an abbreviated plantain border.





Fig. 484 This door in Yunnan is decorated with overlapping lozenges or rhombuses in the pattern known as *fāngshèngwén*.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Wong Hwei Lian and Szan Tan (eds.), *Power Dressing: Textiles for Rulers and Priests from the Chris Hall Collection*, exhibition catalogue, Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2006, p. [99](#).
- <sup>2</sup> Roberta Helmer Stalberg and Ruth Nesi, *China's Crafts: The Story of How They're Made and What They Mean*, New York: Eurasia Press, 1980, p. [39](#).
- <sup>3</sup> Jessica Rawson, *Chinese Ornament: The Lotus and the Dragon*, London: British Museum Publications, 1984, p. [138](#).
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. [139](#).
- <sup>5</sup> Wang Qingzheng (trans. Lillian Chin and Jay Xu), *A Dictionary of Chinese Ceramics*, Singapore: Sun Tree Publishing, 2002, p. [256](#).
- <sup>6</sup> 段建华, 中国吉祥装饰设计 [Duàn Jiàn huá, *Chinese Auspicious Decoration Design*], 北京: 中国轻工业出版社 [May 1, 1999], p. [56](#).



Fig. 485 A young boy and girl wave enticingly towards the large character which means "double happiness" (*shuāngxǐ*) in the center of this bright marriage poster. Peacocks and peonies promise honors and riches while a nandina plant behind the peonies center bottom, with its bright red berries, completes the sentiment of "wishing you a bounteous marriage." The boy has a cock and bat on his belly protector while the girl has a fish and butterfly on hers. The swirling ribbons about them enhance the auspiciousness of the picture. Courtesy of the IISH Stefan R. Landsberger Collection (website: <http://www.iisg.nl/-landsberger>).

## Chapter 13

# CHINESE CHARACTERS

The use of auspicious Chinese characters has a long tradition in China that continues into modern times. Four merit individual attention - *xǐ*, *shòu*, *fú*, and *jí*. These characters are used on furniture, embroideries, amulets, ceramics, jewelery, extraordinary and everyday objects, not only because in their complex and seal forms they are decorative in themselves, but also because they are believed to bring auspiciousness by their presence alone.

**Xǐ (喜)** *Xǐ* (喜), “happiness,” written as a pair (“double happiness, *shuāngxǐ* 双喜 or 囍), is used exclusively in connection with marriages (Figs. [485](#)’ [486](#)). Whether written in red or gold on strips of paper, lanterns, and scrolls, or stamped on textiles or the red envelopes stuffed with cash which wedding guests give to newlyweds, it dominates all wedding decorations. It is also used as a border design on bridal bed curtains and other marriage-related textiles. The *shuāngxǐ* has also been carved in thin pieces of quartz and sewn to head-dresses and other accessories. Contemporary “double happiness” stickers can be purchased in Chinatowns worldwide for pasting on wedding gifts and congratulatory cards.



Fig. 486 The ubiquitous *shuāngxǐ* “double happiness” character used exclusively in connection with marriages. Note the pair of mandarin ducks directly below the character. Close-up of a cotton handkerchief purchased in Dali.

**SHÒU (壽寿)** *Shòu* (壽寿) is one of the few Chinese characters that continues to be depicted in its more complex fifteen-stroke form (壽) despite having an

official “simplified” seven-stroke form (寿) (Fig. [488](#)). Moreover, it is generally the more decorative “seal” characters that are used, and these can vary enormously in appearance (for example, see page 4 for an image depicting 100 forms of the character *fú*). Although all *shòu* characters represent the concept of “longevity,” some people believe that there is a slight difference in meaning between the round and square forms of the seal characters: “The round character means ‘live one’s full span and die a natural death.’ The rectangle character means ‘wish you a long life.’”<sup>1</sup>

Alone, *shòu* can serve as a drawer pull or trivet, earring (Fig. [487](#)), or watermark. Fields of them cover bolts of fabric (see Fig. [48](#)) and good luck posters. *Shòu* is, and always has been, an especially popular pattern on birthday items and has always been associated with the imperial family. For example, when the Emperor Gūangxù (光绪) was married in 1872, “some 7,294 pieces of porcelain were produced at the imperial porcelain factory in Jingdezhen” in celebration, many of them decorated entirely with the character *shòu* or the variant *wànshòu* (万寿, the character *shòu* together with swastikas) (Fig. [489](#)) in a number of different color combinations - red characters on a yellow background, gold characters on an iron red background, blue enamel on a yellow background, etc.<sup>2</sup> Very often, bats are included in the decoration to express *wànshòu wànfú* (万寿万福), “everlasting [wishes of] longevity and good fortune” or in an abbreviated form known as “10,000 blessings” (*wànfú* 万福). If the characters representing *wújiāng* (literally “without boundary”) are added, the interpretation is *wànshòu wújiāng* (万寿 无疆) or “boundless longevity” (Fig. [490](#)).



Fig. 487 A pair of dark amethyst earrings with a stylized *shòu* in gold wire accompanied by enamel flowers.





Fig. 488 Another stylized version of the character *shòu*, this time decorating the four corners of a contemporary Chinese carpet.



Fig. 489 These stylized *shòu* characters are on panels constructed of a swastika (*wàn*) fret design to create the message “*Wànshòu*” or “Long life!”, a traditional “Many Happy Returns” birthday greeting. Lijiang, China.



Fig. 490 A simple cloud design (*yún wén*) decorates the outer rim of this small dish. The small eyelash-like whorls possibly represent bats. The characters in the four white disks read counter-clockwise from



top *wànshòu wújiāng* (“boundless longevity”). Barely visible are two faded *shòu* characters for “longevity.”



Fig. 491 Roof tiles from the Forbidden City, Beijing, decorated with the character for “longevity” and surrounded by eighteen raised “dots.” The number nine and its This latter design was one of the official decorative motifs used in the above-mentioned Gūangxù wedding porcelain collection. Roof tiles are still being made with 寿 in its seal forms (Fig. [491](#)). See also SWASTIKA p. [261](#).

**FÚ** (福) *Fú* (福), “good fortune, or happiness” is often depicted in its homophonous form, a picture of a bat (see p. [112](#)), but also appears by itself (Fig. [495](#)) or with other symbols. Today, small *fú* character pendants and earrings are popular Chinatown trinkets (Fig. [494](#)), as are papercuts. *Fú* is a standard Chinese New Year decoration (Figs. [492](#), [493](#)), and is often hung upside down (*dào* 倒), as this is a pun on the verb “to arrive” (*dào* 到). An upside-down *fù* is thus a rebus for “Good luck arriving!” A paper cut or poster of 100 *fù* wishes the viewer great happiness (see p. [8](#)).

**JÍ** (吉) *Jí* (吉), “good fortune, lucky, auspicious,” peeks out of the ripples on the bottom of imperial court gowns, known as jífú (吉月艮), but is more commonly found today decorating Chinese New Year ornaments (see Fig. [504](#)).

Each of these characters can be the central motif of multi-character expressions or more complex pictures. For example, if the character *shòu* is accompanied by a swastika (*wàn*), the message *wànshòu* is a rebus wishing the viewer “10,000 years of long life,” sometimes translated as “boundless longevity.” An accompanying *rúyí* pattern expresses the thought that one should enjoy a life

“according to one’s wishes” or “for as long as is desired.” The presence of a vine (see p. [40](#)) extends the meaning to “longevity without end,” etc.

## LANTSA SCRIPT

If you encounter a single strange non-Chinese character or a group of six, seven, or eight characters that appear to be Tibetan, you are probably looking at the Lantsa (or Lança) script that is used in Nepal and Tibet for Buddhist prayers and special religious texts (Fig. [496](#)). Most of these character groups found on textiles or ceramics are mantras. Single characters are sometimes called “seed characters” or “seed symbols” (in Sanskrit, *bija-mantra*) and they represent one of the buddhas or bodhisattvas. These single symbols can also be found above paintings of the buddhas or bodhisattvas in temples and monasteries to help worshippers identify them. A very lovely pair of *dǒucǎi* Lantsa wine cups came up for auction recently in Hong Kong, where the eight dark blue Lantsa characters were supported on colorful lotus blooms joined as connected stems amongst vines of green leaves.<sup>3</sup> See also Fig. [542](#).



Fig. 492 Two upside-down fú hang on a Yunnan barn wall playing on the double meaning of the word *dào*, which means both “to arrive” (到) and “upside-down” (倒). “Good luck arriving!” call out these signs.



Fig. 493 Customers purchasing their Chinese New Year ornaments to welcome in a new year. Note the large papercut *fú* in the foreground and the number of smaller versions hanging in the background  
Courtesy of Sha Ying.



Fig. 494 The character *fú* is a popular Chinese New Year trinket.



Fig. 495 An elegant calligraphic *fú*.





Fig. 496 The characters along the four borders of this fifteenth-century *thangka* of Padmapani are in Lantsa script. Note also the garuda at the top center, followed by a pair of *apsara*, *makara*, griffins, lions, and elephants. In a row at the bottom can be seen a number of auspicious items, including rhinoceros horns, lozenges, axe heads, branching coral, and “wishing jewels.” Courtesy of the Chris Hall Collection Trust (on loan to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore).

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> 段建华, 中国吉祥装饰设计 [Duàn Jiànhuá, *Chinese Auspicious Decoration Design*], 北京: 中国轻工业出版社 [May 1, 1999], p. [59](#). This is, however, the only source I have ever found of this differentiation. In Chinese, the first “round” (圆) interpretation is *shòuxiǎng tiānnián, wújí érzhōng* (寿享天年, 无疾而终), the “long” or “square” (长) interpretation is *chángshòu* (长寿).
- <sup>2</sup> Ronald W. Longsdorf, “Porcelains Made for the Grand Imperial Wedding of the Guangxu Emperor,” *Oriental Art*, Vol. 35, No. 5, 2004, pp. [24–31](#).
- <sup>3</sup> *Dǒucǎi* (斗彩) means literally “joined colors,” a ceramic technique of the Ming and Qing Dynasties in which a design is outlined in underglaze cobalt blue and then filled in with overglaze polychrome enamels. See Sotheby’s, *Emperor and Scholar*, auction catalogue, Hong Kong, April 25, 2004, lot# 203.





Fig. 497 This detail from the bottom of a pillar rug, a tall carpet meant to be hung around a temple pillar, usually depicting dragons (you can just see one of the dragon's claws and his tail in this photo) shows examples of both five-colored clouds (the swirls at the top) and five-colored water (the ripples at the bottom).

## Chapter 14

# COLORS

Colors in Chinese art and design are not used haphazardly, but rather signal or convey a variety of meanings from messages concerning status, virtue, fortune, and personality, to mood. This is understandable in a culture that once believed that the color of the clouds could augur future events: red clouds, disaster; yellow clouds, prosperity; green clouds, a plague of insects; and black clouds, floods,<sup>1</sup> although clouds were often multicolored in Chinese paintings and textiles to indicate the auspiciousness of the central design.

## FIVE COLORS

The Five Colors (*wǔsè* 社稷坛) is the name given to the five basic colors in the Chinese world order (Figs. [498](#), [499](#)). Each is associated with one of the five basic elements and four with a compass point, a quadrant of the sky, and a season.

There were nine imperial altars in Beijing that played an important role during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. One of these, the Altar of Earth and Grain (Shèjìtán 社稷坛), was a three-tiered platform that had five kinds of colored earth spread on its surface, as described above – yellow in the center, green in the east, red in the south, white in the west, and black in the north – representing the whole of China. Additionally, the Altars of the Earth, Heaven, the Moon, and the Sun, were each associated with a specific color, mirrored in both the glazed bricks and tiles found on their structures (for example, yellow glazed bricks for the Altar of Earth’s façade and dark blue glazed roof tiles on the Temple of Heaven), as well as the monochrome porcelains produced to be used in rituals and the ceremonial robes worn by the emperor, right down to the stones set in his belt.

The Five Colors appear so frequently on Chinese textiles as clouds or waves of water that they are sometimes referred to as the “threads of life” (Fig. [497](#)). The oldest reference we have to them is in the *Shūjīng* (冠顶, *Book of History*).<sup>3</sup> These five colors continued in use up to modern times, including on the flag of the short-lived Republic (1911–28) to represent the five clans of the “new”

China: red, Manchus; yellow, Chinese; blue, Mongolians; white, Muslims; black, Tibetans.

Generally, crimson, red, and yellow were the preserve of nobility and were forbidden to commoners. During the Han Dynasty (206 BC-CE 220), the color of the silk ribbons that formed part of a person's dress indicated the status of the wearer: the emperor's ribbon was reddish-yellow, princes red, nobility and generals purple, and officials blue or black.<sup>4</sup> During the same period, the rules concerning the wearing of colored jade beads hanging from official headgear (*miǎnguān*, 亮冠) dictated white jade for the emperor, green/ blue jade for princes or dukes, and black jade for ministers.<sup>5</sup>

During the early part of the Song Dynasty (960–1279), men's court robes identified their rank in descending order: purple for officials of the third and fourth ranks, red for the fifth and six ranks, green for the seventh and eighth ranks, and blue for the ninth rank and above. From 1081 onwards, the colors were revised: purple for fourth and fifth, red for sixth to eighth, and green for ninth and below.<sup>6</sup> Even "street peddlers wore dresses of specific colours to signify their trades."<sup>7</sup> During the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), official public dress prescribed crimson for the first four ranks, blue for ranks five and six, and green for ranks eight and nine. It is uncertain, however, whether or not these color gradations were strictly followed. During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), strict rules dictated the color of attire for members of the court, determined by status, occasion, and season. Interested readers are referred to the many excellent volumes listed in the Bibliography that describe these costumes in detail.

### The Five Colors

	Red	White	Blue/Green	Yellow	Black
Compass Point	south	west	east	center	north
Basic Element	fire	metal	wood	earth	water
Compass Animal/ Constellation	red bird	white tiger	green dragon		black snake/tortoise
Season	summer	autumn	spring		winter





Fig. 498 These temple hangings represent the five colors. At the top of each is a *rúyì* head.



Fig. 499 Five-colored flags flap inside the temple grounds of the Temple of the Soul's Retreat (Língyǐnshì), Hangzhou. Each of the five colors represents a compass point, season, and basic element. Although the traditional five colors are red, white, blue/green, yellow, and black it is not uncommon for other colors to be substituted when judged appropriate, for example, in depicting clouds and water. Five-colored flags should be hung in the following sequence, left to right: blue, white, red, green, yellow.

## Imperial Altars

Altar of	Heaven	Sun	Earth	Moon
Chinese Name	Tiantan	Ritan	Ditan	Yuetan
Chinese Character	天坛	日坛	地坛	月坛
Calender Time of Year	winter solstice	spring equinox	summer solstice	autumn equinox
Color of Emperor's Robes	dark blue	red	yellow	pale blue
Stones Set in Belt	lapis lazuli	coral	yellow jade	green or white jade

By Compass Points in Beijing <sup>2</sup>	south	east	north	west
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The color and material of the finials worn on the top of officials' hats of the imperial court, referred to as "spikes," "mandarin hat knobs," or "hat buttons" (*guāndǐng* 冠顶), also strictly defined rank (Fig. [500](#)). Thus, in paintings, hat buttons immediately identify the wearer's rank, although many of the "ancestor paintings" one encounters in antique shops and museum collections today are notoriously fraudulent in "upgrading" an ancestor's true rank.

The earliest hat knobs comprised spikes. Senior-most officials wore a ruby or another red-colored stone in the spike, second-rank officials wore sapphires or other blue-colored stones, third-rank officials wore rock crystal, while the spikes of fourth-rank officials were plain, made only of gilt metal. In 1645, these four groups were subdivided to form eight groups, with each spike now bearing a larger stone and a smaller one set in the sphere, thus ruby plus pearl, ruby plus ruby, ruby plus sapphire, etc.

In 1727, the Emperor Yǒngzhèng (雍正) introduced new round hat "buttons" for less formal occasions, and the system became even more sophisticated with each color dividing into two types (transparent and opaque) to differentiate more ranks, the transparent indicating higher rank than the opaque. The new ranking thus went: top rank transparent ruby, second rank opaque red (coral and other red stones), third rank transparent blue stones such as sapphires, fourth rank opaque blue stones such as lapis lazuli, fifth rank rock crystal, sixth rank white jade or opaque white glass followed by the gilt metals, seventh rank plain gold, eighth rank chased gold, and ninth rank chased silver. Soon thereafter, in 1730, colored glass was allowed to replace the designated gemstones, no doubt providing financial relief to many court officials. Sometimes peacock plumes, which indicated official recognition, also ornamented court hats. See [PEACOCK](#) p. [78](#).





Fig. 500 A collection of eleven hat knobs 1790–1890, each color and substance designating a specific rank. From left to right: (1) clear red glass jewel indicating the rank of a prince or noble, (2) simulated coral, first-rank official, (3) pink porcelain, second-rank official, (4) clear blue glass, third-rank official, (5) opaque lapis lazuli, fourth-rank official, (6) clear glass, fifth-rank official, (7) opaque white glass, sixth-rank official, (8) gilt hollow copper, seventh-rank official, (9) gilt silver, alternative eighth-rank official, (10) gilt hollow copper, eighth-rank official, (11) silver, ninth-rank official. Collection of Ken Rutherford.

## RED

Red (*hóng* 红) is the ultimate Chinese symbol of joy, and is thus used in connection with festive celebrations and special occasions, especially during the Chinese New Year (Figs. [501-504](#)). Red was believed to have magical powers against evil, being the color that most represented the principle of *yang* and the element of fire.<sup>8</sup> One of the most important ingredients used in magical potions was bright red cinnabar (*zhū* 朱).<sup>9</sup>

Brides continue to wear red in China to bring them good luck. In the past, a bridal procession was identified by someone leading it carrying a red umbrella, and red cords were used in the marriage ceremony to bind the bride and groom's wine cups to represent marital union. In the days of Imperial China, the emperor signed royal edicts in vermilion ink and wore a red formal costume at one of the most important rituals of the year, the sun-worshipping ceremony. Red glazes, known as "sacrificial red," were employed on the ceramics used for these ritual ceremonies.



Fig. 501 Everywhere one turns in Beijing's Forbidden City, there is red, as it was the official color of the Ming emperors. While the Qing changed the official court color to indigo blue, they left the Forbidden City's colors untouched. Here red doors decorated with swastikas and bats to create the message *wànfú* ("good luck") circle the character *shòu* for "longevity." Courtesy of Elfi Chandra.



Fig. 502 A Chinatown shop offering small-size red altars to be hung outside small shops.



Fig. 503 *Rúyì* heads decorate these massive doors, contrasting with the bright red walls of Beijing's Forbidden City. Courtesy of Elfi Chandra.



Fig. 504 A table full of small red paper charms await Chinese New Year customers at the most auspicious time of the year. Note the character *jí* (吉) meaning “good fortune.”



Fig. 505 Red bats (*hóngfú*) are considered especially auspicious as they are a rebus for “vast good luck.” Note also the coins, swastikas, and “wishing jewels” emerging at the top of the waves on this imperial dragon robe (see Figs. [521](#), [522](#)). Courtesy of the Chris Hall Collection Trust (on loan to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore).

During the Ming Dynasty, red was the official dynastic color and the color of court robes; royal princes wore red robes with dragon motifs, although the robes of the emperor were yellow as he was the “Son of Heaven.” Even the walls of the Forbidden City were, and still are, painted red.<sup>10</sup> Red also has a homophone meaning “vast” (*hóng* 洪), which explains the popular appearance of red bats (see p. [112](#)) to depict “vast good luck.”

Red is associated with the direction south, as the Red Bird (*zhūquè*) constellations in the southern hemisphere dominated the skies from late spring until summer. The red faces of actors in theatrical productions, such as Chinese opera, signal actors with strong *yáng* characteristics, mainly the dignified and brave warriors and generals who dispel evil.

## WHITE

White (*bái* 白) is the color of autumn, death, and mourning, the element metal, the spiritual world and thus divinity and immortals, and the direction west, represented by the constellations once known as the White Tiger. This perhaps explains why mourners in the Chinese world don white rather than black robes

during the mourning period, although the original use of natural silk was for shrouds. White was so strongly associated with mourning that pale blue was substituted for white to represent the moon as the color of the robe worn by the emperor when making the annual sacrifices at the Altar of the Moon (Yuètán 月坛).

White faces on the stage signal a treacherous or mischievous personality, for example, the clowns in Chinese opera with their white painted noses (Fig. 506), while in religious paintings white faces “are emblematic of mildness.”<sup>11</sup>

Because the word “white” is also homophonous with “100” (*bǎi* 百), which is how the Chinese express “very many,” white is often used to amplify blessings. Hence, a white deer (*báilù* 白鹿) can be interpreted as representing “many official promotions” (*bǎilù* 百禄).

## YELLOW

The color yellow (*huáng* 黄) represents the element earth and is associated with “central” as a compass point, as in “China is the center of the world”. Yellow was also the color associated with the emperor and the royal family, as the emperor was regarded as the “Son of Heaven” and resided in the heart of the Forbidden City, which was identified as being sited at the center of the universe. As a result, the use of yellow glazed tiles was strictly limited to imperial palaces, tombs, and temples or altars (Fig. 507). Visitors to Beijing’s Forbidden City will have noticed that most of the roofs of the buildings are covered in yellow tiles, but there are a few notable exceptions where superstition or protocol demanded otherwise, for example, some of the residences inside the south gate that were occupied by princes have black and green tiles. Throughout the Ming Dynasty, the emperor’s court garment was bright yellow (and embroidered with pheasants and dragons). During the Qing, it was bright yellow except when mandated by occasion, for example, official sacrifices at the Altars of Heaven, the Sun, and the Moon when the robes were blue, red, and pale blue respectively.<sup>12</sup> Yellow was also the mandated color of the gown the emperor wore for official sacrifices to the Earth, and this was echoed in the ceramics used during the ritual. Yellow was so strongly associated with sovereignty that it was restricted to the emperor, although princes were allowed to wear paler shades. Brown was considered a shade of yellow. Magic charms were once written on yellow sheets of paper.

In Chinese opera, however, a yellow face depicts a wicked or treacherous personality, as do the colors blue and green.

## GREEN/BLUE

The Chinese word *qīng* (青) is used to denote green, blue, black, and many shades in between, but is always associated with plants, springtime (signaled by the appearance of the green dragon constellations), or tranquility,<sup>13</sup> as well as youth and immortality (Fig. 509). Blue was, for example, the traditional tile color for temples as it represents the home of the heavenly deities, the most famous example probably being the blue roof tiles on the Temple of Heaven in Beijing (Fig. 508). There was often no distinction made between blue and green, which was considered a shade of blue, which has led to some interesting compositions. It is not unusual, for example, to find such novelties as pine needles embroidered in blue on rank badges. Blue/ green also represents the element “wood” or “growing things.”

A homophone of *qing* means “to congratulate” (*qìng* 庆) and therefore bunches of greenery are used as a congratulatory symbol, accentuating the symbolic meaning of the plant itself.<sup>14</sup> Jade is the single substance most strongly associated with the color green in China. On the stage, however, a green face identifies demons, while a green robe with patches is the conventional costume of a beggar.



Fig. 506 Clowns have white painted noses in Chinese opera, making them easy to identify on stage.





Fig. 507 Yellow tile roofs in Beijing's Forbidden City, the former residence of China's imperial families for 500 years. Yellow is the color associated with the emperor and the royal family as the emperor was regarded as the "Son of Heaven."

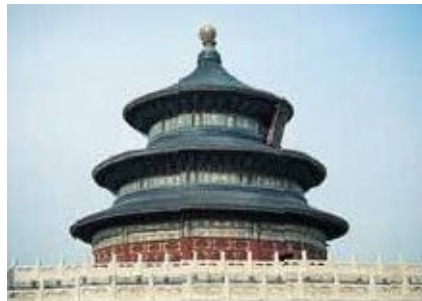


Fig. 508 The Temple of Heaven's round Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests is built on a tri-level marble terrace and has a three-tiered blue tile roof that represents heaven. The emperor's robes worn at the official ceremonies at this temple on the winter solstice were also dark blue.



Fig. 509 Detail of a building decorated with traditional patterns in Yunnan, China. Note the use of green and blue as they are associated with plants, wood, immortality, youth and springtime, dragons, and the direction east. The central motif is a double-headed *vajra* or thunderbolt, one of the symbols of Vajrayana Buddhism.

In textile use, the color green is a relative newcomer to China. For example, “no green is apparent in Chinese rugs that antedate the Kien-lung [Qiánlóng] period, and only in rugs made after 1875.... We look in vain for greens in Chinese rugs. When they appear at rare intervals they are of late date.”<sup>15</sup>

This is interesting because if one color is associated with China, it is usually the shade of green known as “celadon.” Celadon in China, however, refers to the gray to olive green to bluish-green glaze that has been used since the Shang Dynasty (1766–1050 BCE) and perfected during the Ming, when it was most admired for its strong resemblance to the color of a good jade. The color is due to the presence of ferrous iron in the glaze brought out when pots are fired in a reduction atmosphere, the different colors and shades reflecting the varying amounts of iron in the pot’s body and glaze and the firing conditions. The name celadon itself is not a Chinese term. Its origin remains unknown although it is usually credited to either the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman (1520–66) or an eighteenth-century French actor who wore costumes of this color on stage.<sup>16</sup>

Azure blue is associated with dragons, springtime, and the direction east. The emperor wore a formal blue court garment at the important annual ceremonies when the heaven and grains were worshipped. Indigo blue was the most common background color of Manchu clothing during the Qing, in rejection of the Ming red. The sole exception was the robe worn by the emperor at the sacrifice held at the Altar of the Sun, when red was required. Turquoise blue is known as *jǐngtàilán* (景泰蓝), also meaning cloisonné enamel, as it was a popular color in cloisonné work.

## PURPLE

Purple (*zǐ* 紫) was a color associated with the imperial family in China, as it was the symbolic color of the North Star or pole star known as *zǐ wēixīng* (紫微星), which the Chinese believed was at the center of the cosmos. The Forbidden City used to be referred to as the Purple Forbidden City, as it was also seen as being at the center of the universe. As a result, just as yellow was associated with the emperor, purple was the color used by the emperor’s grandsons.

## BLACK

Black is associated with winter, water, and the direction north. Because black was associated with water, you will see black-tiled roofs in China. The roof of the Imperial Library (Wén Yuān Gé, 文淵閣, known as the Pavilion of Literary Profundity) in the Forbidden City, for example, had black tiles symbolizing water to help safeguard the valuable books stored inside.

A black face on the Chinese stage denotes an honest but uncouth character. When it is combined with white, however, it often depicts an informer or sorceress.<sup>[17](#)</sup>

## Footnotes

- <sup>[1](#)</sup> C. A. S. Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, 3rd edn, New York: Dover Publications, 1976, p. [79](#).
- <sup>[2](#)</sup> Although the emperor's position during the actual ceremonies was mandated by tradition (he faced north when at the Temple of Heaven, south when at the Temple of Earth, east when at the Temple of the Sun, and west when at the Temple of Earth, he otherwise sat facing south, which meant that the uppermost four of the Twelve Symbols of Imperial Authority on his robes were normally perfectly aligned with Beijing's four main altars (the sun disk being on his left shoulder, the moon disk on his right, the constellation on his upper chest, and the mountains on his upper back). See Gary Dickinson and Linda Wrigglesworth, *Imperial Wardrobe*, Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 2000, p. [84](#).
- <sup>[3](#)</sup> Scott Minick and Jiao Ping, *Arts and Crafts of China*, Singapore: Thames & Hudson, 1996, p. [17](#).
- <sup>[4](#)</sup> Zhou Xun and Gao Chunming, *5000 Years of Chinese Costumes*, Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1984, p. [32](#).
- <sup>[5](#)</sup> Ibid., p. [34](#).
- <sup>[6](#)</sup> Ibid., p. [111](#).
- <sup>[7](#)</sup> Ibid., p. [124](#).
- <sup>[8](#)</sup> H. L. Li, *Chinese Flower Arrangement*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Hedera House, 1956, p. [22](#).
- <sup>[9](#)</sup> Roberta Helmer Stalberg and Ruth Nesi, *China's Crafts: The Story of How They're Made and What They Mean*, New York: Eurasia Press, 1980, p. [53](#).
- <sup>[10](#)</sup> Interestingly, however, the bright red that predominates in many a modern thick, plush Chinese rug was never found as a primary, or even secondary, color in Chinese carpets before the twentieth century. Although a vivid ruby red existed in Chinese silk fabrics and brocades, only such "fruit" tones as apricot, peach, and persimmon were used in carpetry.
- <sup>[11](#)</sup> T. C. Lai (ed.), *Things Chinese*, Hong Kong: Swindon Book Company, 1971, p. [40](#).
- <sup>[12](#)</sup> Zhou and Gao, *5000 Years of Chinese Costumes*, p. [174](#).
- <sup>[13](#)</sup> Yang Xianrang and Yang Yang, *Chinese Folk Art*, Beijing: New World Press, 2000, p. [245](#).

- [14](#) For example, in 1923, when Florence Ayscough was building her Chinese home, her houseboy included a bunch of leaves of the evergreen *Rohdea japonica* in the Raising the Ridge Pole Ceremony to represent “10,000 Year Greens.” *A Chinese Mirror: Being Reflections of the Reality behind Appearance*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1925, p. [37](#).
- [15](#) Tiffany Studios, *Antique Chinese Rugs*, Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1969, p. [37](#).
- [16](#) The Topkapi Saray Museum has an amazing collection of 1,350 celadons dating from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries.
- [17](#) Yang and Yang, *Chinese Folk Art*, p. [245](#).





Fig. 510 The Altar of Abstinence was a richly endowed Buddhist monastery some 15 miles (24 km) from Beijing in the area known as the western hills. It was a favorite resort of the Qiánlóng Emperor and the view from its terraces was said to be superb. The nine small figures along the roof testify to the building's use by members of the imperial family. Vandyke photogravure of a photograph by Donald Mennie, published in *The Pageant of Peking*, Shanghai, 1920.



## Chapter 15

# NUMBERS

The Chinese love of order and hierarchy resulted in a fascination with groupings. Immense importance is placed on pairs of items in the Chinese world. Forget the single vase centered on an altar or a lone chair; it must be a pair or nothing. There are no single lanterns or potted plants, but carefully balanced rows. But once the concept of a pair is established, larger odd-numbered groupings are allowed, so after that initial hurdle, we find important groupings of three, four, five, six, seven, eight, and nine, and their multiples.

Readers may sometimes find it easier to identify an art motif by counting the number of objects in it (for example “four bats” or “eight objects in swirling ribbons”) and then looking in the appropriate section below, rather than trying to look up each individual component. Sometimes it is the number of times the object appears that is important in understanding a picture’s meaning rather than the objects themselves (for example, see the explanation of the picture of ten cats on p. [115](#)).

Basic to Chinese numerology is an understanding that even numbers are considered *yīn* (阴), the feminine or negative principle, and odd numbers *yáng* (阳), the masculine or positive principle in nature.<sup>1</sup> “One Yáng brings forth two Yīn; Yáng plus Yīn makes three, and all things are supposed by the Chinese to spring from this combination.”<sup>2</sup>

## TWO

The mathematical word for the number two (*èr* 二) is reserved in Chinese for phone numbers, addresses, mathematics, and prices; it is seldom used in referring to objects. The correct word in referring to two chairs, or shoes, or vases is *liǎng* (两) or *shuāng* (双), which have meanings closer to “a pair, double, both” (Figs. [511](#), [512](#)). The Chinese like the symmetry of the concept of “a pair” and thus prefer objects such as chairs, vases, scrolls, and other items to be arranged in pairs.<sup>3</sup> Chinese New Year couplets and the pairs of door guardians that appear during this festive time are classic examples. Perhaps the Chinese

view that all things derive from the “two that form a whole” (*yīn* and *yáng*) is at the root.

### THREE

Chinese belief holds that there are three (*sān* 三) main forces that constitute the whole of existence. This belief is reflected in one of the first verses Chinese children used to learn from the *Three Character Classic* (*Sānzìjīng* 三字经):

The three powers are heaven, earth, and man;

The three luminaries are the sun, the moon, and the stars.<sup>4</sup>

There are many groupings of three in Chinese culture: the Three Relationships (“justice” between a prince and his minister, “affection” between a father and son, and “harmony” between a husband and wife), Three Fears or Awes, Three Precautions, Three Unfilial Acts, Three Countenances of a Gentleman, Three Isles of the Immortals (p. 176), Three Abundances (p. 49), Three Friends of Winter (p. 37), Three Sages (p. 196), and others, which may or may not appear in art. By extension, multiples of three, such as nine and twenty-seven, are also auspicious, as is the number twelve (nine plus three).

The best example for explaining the importance of three is the description of the most significant Chinese animal, the dragon (p. 121), which is said to consist of three main sections (head to shoulders, shoulders to loins, loins to tip of tail), and is the composite of nine (three times three) different creatures, with eighty-one (nine times nine) scales, and nine sons.

In the Forbidden City, the main halls of the outer and inner courtyards are arranged in groups of threes whereas the residential buildings are in groups of six.

In the Chinese calendar, the third day of the third lunar month is the day of the Pure (or Clear) Brightness Festival (Qīngmíngjié 清明节), when families come together for a ceremonial cleaning of the family tomb and to make offerings to their ancestors.

Many religious symbols, the most common examples being perhaps the trefoil banners of Hinduism and Buddhism and the triple-arched cloud of Chinese art, are also composed of three parts representing the gods Brahma,

Vishnu, and Shiva in Hinduism, and the Three Jewels of Buddhism – the Buddha, his teachings (*dharma*), and the monastic community (*sangha*) – in Buddhism.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 511 A pair of blue-and-white wall flower or incense holders decorated with one of the oldest Chinese patterns, a pair of fish. These fish are not symbolizing the Buddhist belief in freedom and happiness gained from salvation, however. Here they represent wealth. We know this by the inscription directly above their heads that reads *Niánniányǒuyú* (“To have a surplus year after year”). The characters on the right read *Mínguóliùnián*, which means the sixth year of the Republic of China, or 1918.



Fig. 512 A pair of lions, each with a ball and cubs. Carved wood.

## FOUR

The number four (*sì* 四) is introduced in the *Three Character Classic* (*Sānzìjīng* 三字经) by the four seasons of the year. This is a very popular motif that appears on tens of thousands of screens and scrolls, usually depicting the mandated combinations of birds and/or flowers to represent each season. These beautiful

stylistic and idealistic paintings of flowers (花) and birds (鸟) are known in Chinese by their combined name *huāniǎo* (花鸟).

Groupings of four are popular in Chinese art, as they readily lend themselves to balanced depictions. From at least Neolithic times, a revered group of four animals known as the Four Heraldic or Divine Creatures (*síling* (四灵), which later evolved into the Four Spiritual, Supernatural, or Intelligent Animals (*sìshén* 四字神),<sup>6</sup> symbolized the four quadrants (as identified by their constellations) of the sky and thus their respective locations – the Green Dragon of the East, the White Tiger of the West, the Red Bird of the South, and the Black Tortoise of the North (p. 110). Each encompasses seven smaller “lunar mansions” (*xiù* 宿) or sectors of the sky that correspond roughly to Western constellations (for example, Capricorn falls into the Black Tortoise quadrant and Cancer into the Red Bird quadrant). Additionally, each of these quadrants was associated with a season of the year as the time when the constellations were visible. The Dragon was visible in the spring, the Red Bird constellations were visible late spring to summer in the southern hemisphere, autumn was marked by the stars of the White Tiger setting with the sun in the west, and winter arrived when the Black Warrior rose in the northeast and set in the northwest.<sup>7</sup>

The most common and popular grouping of four is the Four Happinesses, usually depicted by four bats (see p. 112).

The four fierce-looking guards standing at the entrances to Buddhist and Chinese temples are the Four Guardians (*sìdàtiānwáng* 四大天王) (see p. 194).

The Four Arts of the Scholar that indicate a gentleman’s education and breeding are music, chess, poetry, and calligraphy (*qín qí shū huà* 琴棋書畫),<sup>8</sup> usually depicted by a lute, a chessboard, books, and paintings (or scrolls). They are often embellished with ribbons and streamers and are a popular porcelain, textile, and cabinetry design.

Another common grouping of four that marks an educated man, and hence a person of refinement, is the Four Treasures of the Literary Study (*wénfáng sìbǎo*, 文房四宝), which comprises a calligraphy brush, paper, ink, and inkstone.

The grouping of four plants representing the four seasons of the year – bamboo, orchids, prunus, and chrysanthemum – is known as *sìjūnzi* (四君子), translated variously as the Four Gentlemen, Four Noble Characters, Four Princely Men, or Four Plants of Virtue (Fig. 513).

There are many other groupings of four, for example, the Four Classes of

Society (scholars, farmers, laborers, and merchants), Four Books (*sìshū* (四书), attributed to Confucius,<sup>9</sup> Four Forms of Mathematics, Four Forms of Diagnosis, Four Sacred Mountains of Buddhism (see p. 244), Four Pests, Four-line Poetry, and Four Essential Components of a Garden.<sup>10</sup> The tradition of “four” in China was so strong that even Maoist China acknowledged the importance of four through its Four Olds (*sìjiù* 四旧, old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits) and Four Kinds of Elements (*sìlèifēnzi* 四类分子, landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, and bad elements). However, in keeping with the Chinese belief that pictorial images should be positive, none of the latter are represented pictorially except perhaps on Cultural Revolution posters.

According to the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*, 易经), the number four is said to represent the female or feminine, the number five the male or masculine; this is important when we look at number nine.

## FIVE

The number five (*wǔ* 五) is a basic organizational construct in Chinese thought. The identification of the Five Elements (*wǔ xíng* 五行, wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) demanded that most groupings conform to the same auspicious number. Their corresponding colors were wood green/blue, fire red, earth yellow, metal white, and water black. Hence, the Five Basic Metals (gold, silver, bronze, lead, and iron) were followed by the Five Directions (north, south, east, west, and center), Five Virtues (charity of heart, duty towards one’s neighbor, propriety, wisdom, and truth), Five Sacred Mountains of Daoism (see p. 240), Five Planets (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn), Five Tastes, Five [Musical] Notes, Five Spices, Five Viscera (which were believed to be the seat of all emotions),<sup>11</sup> and Five Jade Sacrificial Vessels (see JADE p. 62), etc. Five generations living harmoniously together under one roof was said to be life’s “greatest bliss.”<sup>12</sup> (One wonders if even the concept of the Five-Year Plan should





be credited to China.)

Fig. 513 The Four Gentlemen (*sijūnzi*) – bamboo, orchids, prunus, and chrysanthemums – surround a central motif in the bottom of this small bowl of five bats encircling the character *shòu*. See Fig. [225](#).



Fig. 514 A large platter depicting five five-clawed dragons sporting amidst *rúyì* head-shaped clouds, a flaming pearl or jewel in the center. Along the rim are nine peaches (representing immortality and nine being the number associated with the imperial family), five bats for the Five Happinesses, and five

clusters of the plant known as *Rohdea Japonica* (in Chinese, *wànniánqīng*). The presence of this plant intensifies the main message “10,000 fold.” This platter thus has a very auspicious design wishing its “royal” recipient a long and happy life.

The most popular grouping of five is the Five Happinesses, as the most common visual was a circular design of five bats or four bats encompassing either the character *shòu* (寿) or a peach for longevity, one of the Five Happinesses. See BAT p. [112](#).

The clouds once embroidered on court robes are known as five-colored clouds, and if you are fortunate enough to see a Daoist priest’s robe, you will discover in its designs prominent groupings of five (mountains, mystical symbols, etc.).<sup>[13](#)</sup>

The Five Classics (*wǔjīng* 五经) form the basis of Chinese learning.<sup>[14](#)</sup> Confucius taught that there were five basic relationships (*wǔlún* 五论) that should dictate human behavior (see p. [168](#)), which are sometimes represented in scenes of five objects. One of the oldest examples is a jade belt plaque (a small piece of jade with a carved design which was then sewn or fastened onto a belt to decorate it) depicting five different types of birds amongst flowers, believed to be an illustration of *wǔ lún* (五论).<sup>[15](#)</sup>

For the origin and symbolism in the portrayal of five children (*wǔdàowáwá* 五道娃娃), see p. [156](#).

Visitors to Beijing’s Forbidden City will have seen the five stone bridges in the center of the first courtyard inside the South gateway spanning the Inner Golden River (*Jīnshuǐ* 金水), used exclusively by the emperor and his family. They represent the Five Elements, Five Virtues, etc. Other combinations of five and nine are easily spotted in the Forbidden City, for example, the roof of the Hall of Supreme Harmony has five ridges with nine roof guardians atop its corners, while the relief ramp in the center of the staircase is carved with five mountains and nine dragons, etc.

On the negative side, there are the Five Poisonous Creatures (*wǔdú* 五毒) (see p. [100](#)) and the precarious nature of the most dangerous day of the year, the fifth day of the fifth lunar month (see Fig. [9](#)). This day, which correlates with the summer solstice, the day when the masculine principle is at its peak and the feminine or *yīn* begins to rise, is known as Double Five (*Zhòngwǔ jié* 重五节 as well as *Duānwǔjié* 端午节 or *Duānyángjié* 端阳节), and commands special

associations with the Demon Chaser Zhōng Kuí (see p. [163](#)). It is also the date of the Dragon Boat Festival,<sup>[16](#)</sup> which commemorates the death of the famous loyalist poet Qū Yuán (屈原, 343?–277 BCE) (see p. [168](#)).

## FIVE AND NINE

Five combined with nine forms the auspicious combination *jiǔ wǔ zhìzūn* (九五至尊, “loftiness of nine and five”), synonymous with the emperor, as the number five represents the male and *yáng*, and the number nine is considered the supreme number in Chinese thought.<sup>[17](#)</sup> The importance of these two numbers dates back at least to the trigrams of the *Yijing* (易经, *Book of Changes*), especially the trigram known as “Nine-Five; flying dragon in the sky, benefits the lord.”<sup>[18](#)</sup>

As noted previously, a dragon is said to be made from nine different animals, and the imperial dragon has five claws (lesser dragons have four). If you visit the great hall on Tiananmen Square in Beijing, you will note that it is nine bays wide and five bays deep; this is not a coincidence. See also nine, p. [230](#).

## SIX

Whereas the number nine represents heaven, the number six (*liù* 六) represents earth (the trigram for earth consists of three broken lines, totalling six.) Hence, the upper tier of the Altar of Earth (Dìtán 地坛) in Beijing measures 60 *chi* (20 square meters) and the lower tier 66 *chi* (22 square meters), and there are six marble gates on the north side with one each to the east, south, and west to form a total of nine. In addition, the square flagstones (“square” represents earth and “round” heaven) are laid in multiples of six and eight.

Both six and eight are symbols of the earth, with the number six being more “commonly emphasized ... in a primitive context, while three and eight seem to have gained attention much later.”<sup>[19](#)</sup> For example, there are Six Domestic Animals (*liùchù* 六畜, pig, ox, goat, horse, fowl, and dog), Six Hollow Organs (*liùfù* 六腑, gall bladder, stomach, large and small intestine, bladder, and *sanjiao*), Six Factors in Nature (*liùqì* 六气, wind, cold, summer heat, humidity, dryness, and fire), the Six Grains that mankind eats (rice, millet, rye, barley, wheat, and pulses), and the Six Relations (*liùqīn* 六亲, father, mother, elder brothers, younger

brothers, wife, children), most of which are not depicted in symbolic form in art. One does see, however, paintings and prints in which the subjects are engaged in the Six [Ancient] Arts – ceremonies (*lǐ* 礼), music (*yuè* 乐), archery (*shēn* 身寸), charioteering (*yù* 御), calligraphy (*shū* 书, which includes painting), and mathematics (*shù* 数).<sup>20</sup>

## SEVEN

The number seven (*qī* 七) is considered an unlucky number, and is certainly the unluckiest day of the month according to the traditional Chinese calendar-based almanacs.<sup>21</sup> It was a day on which one should avoid any new beginnings, be it marriage, a new job, a move to a new home, the embarkation on a journey, etc. Possibly because it was associated with weakness and bad omens, it became associated with the *yīn* principle, and hence women, despite being an “odd” number. It is the date of the best-known women’s festival in China, the Double Seven or Sisters Festival, celebrated on the seventh day of the seventh month, which has ironically become labeled Chinese Valentine’s Day. This date (Qīxī 七夕) commemorates the one evening a year the ill-fated lovers known as the Oxherd and the Weaving Maiden are permitted to meet, crossing the river that separates them on a bridge made of magpies (see *ZHĪNŮ* p. [207](#)). See also *MAGPIE* p. [77](#).

The *Three Character Classic* (*Sānzìjīng* 三字经) introduces the number seven with the concept of the Seven Passions: joy, anger, pity, fear, love, hate, and desire.

Paintings can be found of Chinese gentlemen enjoying the Seven Fine Arts (practicing their calligraphy, painting, playing the table lute, playing checkers, writing poems, drinking wine, and cultivating flowers). These activities are usually being engaged in by the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grotto (see p. [175](#)).

Another group of seven objects (*qībǎo* 七宝) can be translated as the Seven Treasures, and depict worldly as opposed to spiritual treasures – rhinoceros horns, coins, ingots, scrolls, twin lozenges, branches of coral, and *rúyì*. They are often shown linked by flowing ribbons or streamers. These are used to highlight the magical and/or divine powers of the objects and have been described by some scholars as artistic devices similar to the haloes Western artists once painted surrounding religious figures. This device is also used with such groups as the

Eight Buddhist Symbols (or Treasures), discussed below.

## EIGHT

The number eight (*bā* 八) is auspicious as the Eight Trigrams (*bāguà* 八卦) were said to be the origin of all things (see p. [239](#)). When a child is born, eight characters are written down to signify the year, month, day, and hour of birth.

There are, in addition to the Eight Trigrams, three groupings of eight that appear again and again in Chinese art. These are the Eight Daoist Symbols (p. [240](#)), the Eight Buddhist Symbols (p. [241](#)), and the Eight Precious Things (*bābǎo* 八宝) or Eight Auspicious Treasures (*bājíxiángbāoxiāng* 八吉祥宝相). The **Eight Precious Things** are general symbols of good luck and prosperity in Chinese art that are drawn from a large pool of primarily secular good luck symbols, although sometimes one or more of the Eight Treasures of Buddhism are included (Fig. [515](#)). The most common members of the group are (1) a pearl (*bǎozhū* 宝珠), representing good fortune (riches), that evolved over time into flaming colored jewels, both round and in pastel shades, (2) a lozenge or rhombus (*fāngshèng* 方胜), which was perhaps once “an ancient headdress symbolizing victory” or success,<sup>[22](#)</sup> that appeared singly or, later, in interlocked pairs, (3) a stone chime (*qìng* 磬), homophonous with “congratulations” (*qìng* 庆), (4) a pair of rhinoceros horn (*xījiǎo* 犀角) cups both for health and because the rhinoceros *xī* (犀) is homophonous with “happy” (*xǐ* 喜), (5) gold circular ornaments that later become a metal coin (*jīnqián* 金钱) or pair of coins, (6) ivory tusks, (7) branching coral, a symbol of wealth and status, (8) an ancient disk-shaped mirror (*jìng* 镜) for conjugal fidelity (see MAGPIE p. [77](#)), (9) rolls of tribute silk that later appear as books, scrolls, or Buddhist scripture boxes for wisdom and culture, (10) a *rúyì* (如意) jewel that gains a handle to become a *rúyì* scepter, its head resembling a piece of *língzhī* fungus, and (11) an artemisia leaf (*àiyè* 艾叶) on ceramics and simple textiles, but never on court textiles as it was a folk superstition, for its protective and curative powers. When drawn, the objects often have fluttering ribbon streamers to enhance their importance and power.





Fig. 515 Many groupings of the Eight Auspicious Treasures incorporate objects that more rightfully belong in other auspicious groupings. For example, this detail of a small Tibetan carpet includes at least two objects that symbolize the Eight Immortals – a gourd and a fan – plus several objects from Buddhism’s Eight Buddhist Symbols.



Fig. 516 The Eight Immortals are eight in number because eight is an auspicious number in China. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

Some symbols are difficult to identify and many were, and still are, confused because of their highly stylized depictions. Museum goers will be at a distinct advantage for they will have seen the pieces of polished metal that once served as mirrors, and the boomerang-shaped metal and stone chimes. (Do not be surprised if you find a gold or jade rendition of a stone chime in a hair ornament, such as those in the Palace Museum collection in Beijing.) But some objects are particularly confusing as to origin, and the groups seem to be “fluid,” with elements of one group, such as the Eight Buddhist Symbols, often reappearing in another, such as the Eight Precious Objects. In addition, there is the group of symbols representing the Eight Daoist Immortals (Fig. 516). The underlying principle that unifies the objects chosen to form the group of eight is that all will be either precious or valuable in their own right or have special powers.

Hopeful candidates in Imperial China seeking to pass the examinations that would reward them with a position in the imperial civil service once took exams that included an eight-part (or “legged”) essay (*bāgǔwén* 八股文), which became synonymous with stereotyped writing. There are also Eight Musical Instruments (*bāyīn* 八音, see p. 254). Could the famous Eighth Route Army (*Bālùjūn* 八路军) led by the Chinese Communist Party during the War of Resistance against Japan

have been any number other than eight?<sup>23</sup>

If you should happen upon a collection of what seems to be objects in need of repair, such as manuscripts, fans, paintings, etc., you are probably viewing a grouping known as the Eight Broken (bāsuìtú 八碎图), which is a pun on the homophone *sui* that can mean either “year” (岁) or “broken/smashed” (碎). The picture is a rebus for longevity.<sup>24</sup>

Eight was such an auspicious number that during the reign of the Tang Dynasty Emperor Xuánzōng (r. 712–56), women used to first pluck then draw in their eyebrows with a dark pigment (*dài* 黛) in a process known as *dài méi* (黛眉) to form the distinctive shape of the Chinese character *bā* (八). Men’s fashions also bowed to the superstition, and courtiers’ hats from the Tang through the Song Dynasties also had their two end ribbon “tails” slanting down behind the head to form the same character eight.<sup>26</sup>

Eight remains an auspicious number representative of wealth in Cantonese-speaking communities.



Fig. 517 The Nine Dragon Wall of Beijing’s Beihai Park. Courtesy of Angela Soeteber.



Fig. 518 The Nine Dragon Wall in Beijing’s Forbidden City.





Fig. 519 The Forbidden City's famous doors with nine rows of nine studs, adding up to a total of eighty-one. Courtesy of Elfi Chandra.

## NINE

The number nine (*jiǔ* 九) was considered a perfect number by the Chinese, and was closely associated with heaven, “evok[ing] infinity,”<sup>27</sup> partly because it was the product of three times three, the most basic unit of three being heaven, earth, and man, and partly because nine (*jiǔ* 九) in Chinese resembles the word meaning “forever” (*jiǔ* 久) (see Fig. 510). Nine is also the result of four, the number that represents the female, and five, which represents the male, as explained in the *Book of Changes* (*Yījīng*, 易经).<sup>28</sup> Additionally, a *yáng* (阳) line (unbroken, male, strong) was represented by the number nine.

The emperor's status as the Son of Heaven (*tiānzǐ* 天子) was represented by the number nine, which was why his robes and those of the empress were decorated with nine dragons. Dragons, composite creatures drawing upon nine animals, were said to have eighty-one scales (nine by nine) and nine sons (see DRAGON p. 517, 518). The screen was built in 1771 during the reign of the Emperor Qiánlóng, and touching it was once punishable by death.

Another example is the number of studs on the palace gates. “The studs are usually arranged in nine rows of nine each, totalling eighty-one (Fig. 519). This is even true of the marble gates of the ‘underground palace’ of the Dingling Mausoleum in Beijing: eighty-one (nine by nine) studs were carved out of the stone. If the visitor goes to the Temple of Guān Yǔ in Luoyang, he will also find on the red gate nine rows of nine wood studs each. This was because he was given posthumous honours of an emperor.”<sup>29</sup>

Another famous Beijing example is the Temple of Heaven (Fig. 520). The temple is composed of three tiers of round platforms laid out in multiples of

nine. The stones of the terraces are laid out in concentric rings of slabs. The innermost ring has nine fan-shaped slabs, the next ring eighteen, the third twenty-seven, etc. until the last or outermost ring, which consists of eighty-one (nine by nine) slabs. Nine steps lead from each level to the next.

The ideal number of courtyards for a Chinese mansion is nine, and of course it was nine suns that the archer Hòu Yì (see p. [164](#)) shot down from the sky to protect the world. See also TRIPOD VESSELS p. [262](#).

The number nine is also associated with the chrysanthemum (*jú* 菊) because the plant flowers in the ninth month, also known as the Chrysanthemum Moon, and the color of its petals resemble the sun's rays. The ninth day of the ninth month, which coincides with the autumn equinox, is called Double Nine (Chóngjiǔ 重九 or Zhòngyáng 重阳) and is marked by the tending of graves and the drinking of chrysanthemum wine or tea and walking in the mountains; the latter two activities were said to have been the good advice of a Daoist sage who saved a Han Dynasty hero and his family from a precipitous death.

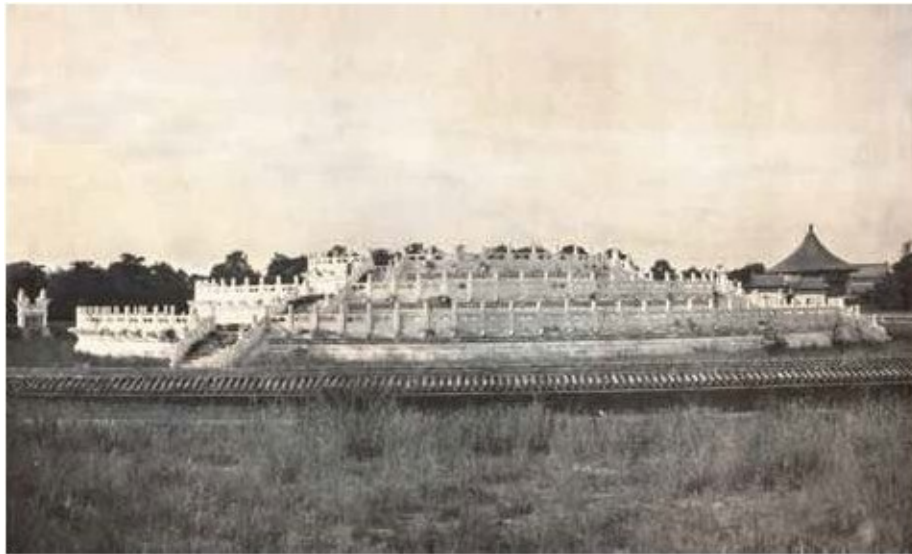


Fig. 520 The circular mound altar of the Temple of Heaven, Beijing, consisting of three tiers. The upper terrace is made up of nine concentric rings of slabs. The first ring or the innermost circle consists of nine fan-shaped slabs, the second ring eighteen (two by nine) slabs, the third twenty-seven (three by nine) slabs, until the last or outermost ring, which consists of eighty-one (nine by nine) slabs. Vandyke photogravure of a photograph by Donald Mennie, published in *The Pageant of Peking*, Shanghai, 1920.

Although nine is a “good” number, it is also a *yáng* or strong number, so a “double nine” could also bring about too much of a good thing and be



dangerous, hence the precautions of drinking chrysanthemum tea or wine on this day, carrying dogwood for protection, and escaping to the mountains to hide from danger. Kite flying is still seen as an auspicious activity that helps prolong life, especially when performed on this day.

Nine of anything in Chinese art implies “many.” Court ladies during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) wore headdresses consisting of a row of nine bats (“lots of good luck”). Fox fairies are believed to have nine tails in Chinese folklore. A nine-character verse consisting of nine nine-stroke Chinese characters was associated with forthcoming good fortune and luck (see *GOD OF WEALTH*, p. [161](#)). A stack of nine coins represents the wish for unlimited wealth. The numbers eight and nine are still considered lucky in Chinese cultures and remain highly desirable apartment, telephone, or licence plate digits (8, 9, 18, 168, etc.).

## TEN

The number ten (*shí* 十) has the same significance as “tenfold” in English; it is used to mean “many,” as in the Chinese expression *shífēn* (十分, “very, extremely”).

Ten is the number of correct forms of behavior, as per Confucius’s Five Basic Relationships (p. [168](#)), and Chinese tradition holds that there are ten elements of a good life: “manifold returns from a single investment, two hearts living together in harmony, passing all three levels of civil examinations with flying colours, peace throughout the four seasons, a bountiful harvest of all five major grains, the vigour of spring growth in all six Chinese cardinal directions, being blessed with seven successful sons, a life longer than any of the Eight Immortals, nine generations under one roof,<sup>[30](#)</sup> and complete prosperity and wealth.”<sup>[31](#)</sup> This is the basis of the Chinese saying *shíquán shíměi* (十全十美) or “perfect in every way,” which is the implied meaning of any grouping of ten, such as the picture of ten playful cats (Fig. [233](#)).

## TWELVE

The *Book of Rites* (*Lǐjì* 礼记) tells us that “Twelve is the number of Heaven” and therefore there are twelve distinctive symbols that were used by the emperor to

confirm his position as the Son of Heaven (*tiānzǐ* 天子). They are known as the Twelve Symbols of Imperial Authority or Twelve Imperial Symbols (*shíèr chángwén* 十二常纹). The *Shūjīng* (书经) or *Book of History*, one of the great Chinese classics, which is said to document China's earliest history and personages, credits them with having existed throughout China's history, possibly as early as the Western Zhou (1027–771 BCE). Schuyler Cammann tells us, however, that while we may have reason to doubt that date, “we can be sure that they appeared on the Imperial sacrificial robes in the Han Dynasty, and they were used by all the native Chinese dynasties thereafter”<sup>32</sup> (Figs. 521, 522). Zhao Feng of the China National Silk Museum wrote in 2005 that “the earliest known example of the Twelve Imperial Symbols is the portrait of the King of Chu on a lacquer-painted screen uncovered from the tomb of Sima Jinlong (Northern Wei dynasty)”<sup>33</sup> or 386–534 CE. These twelve symbols of authority eventually appeared collectively on the emperor's robes, arranged in three concentric rings at the shoulders, at the waist, and at knee height.

On the shoulders were the sun, represented by a red disk containing a three-legged bird on the left shoulder (Fig. 523), the moon, represented by a greenish-white disk depicting the hare that lives on the moon with her mortar and pestle on the right shoulder (Fig. 524), and the stars, sometimes referred to as “the constellation,” representing the heavens and shown by seven stars in the late Ming but only three circles connected by thin lines in the Qing (Fig. 525), and mountains or rocks, representing stability and the earth (Fig. 526). These four elements represented four of the most serious ceremonies the emperor presided over annually at the Altars of the Temples of Heaven, Earth, the Sun, and the Moon.

At waist height appeared a pair of small five-clawed dragons (Fig. 527) and “flowery fowl” (*huāchóng* 花虫), sometimes identified as a golden pheasant, sometimes the mysterious red bird of legend, perhaps after the constellation in the southern hemisphere known as Red Bird),<sup>34</sup> to symbolize the birds and beasts of the natural world (Fig. 528); the *fǔ* (黻), sometimes described as a pair of back-to-back bows (*gōng* 弓), to symbolize “the dualistic forces of good and evil, etc., being the alleged prototype of the *yin-yang* symbol”<sup>35</sup> and representing the emperor's power to judge (Fig. 529); and an axe head (*fǔ* 黹), to symbolize the emperor's temporal powers to make decisions and to punish (Fig. 530).

Finally, at knee height on the skirt or undergarment were a pair of

ceremonial cups or goblets (*zōngyí* 宗舞), during the Ming decorated with a monkey and a tiger, but later during the Qing, a pair of animals resembling monkeys, representing the element “metal” (Fig. [531](#)); grain or millet (*f ě nmǐ* 粉米), sixty dots to depict grains, nicely lined up to make a round circle in the Ming and later distributed randomly in the circle during the Qing, to represent wood [all growing things or plants] (Fig. [532](#)); aquatic grass (*zǎo* 藻), sometimes called pondweed to represent water (Fig. [533](#));<sup>36</sup> and red flames to represent fire (Fig. [534](#)). These last four symbols thereby represent four of the Five Elements (the fifth, earth, already represented in the mountains on the nape of the neck of the emperor’s robe) (Fig. [535](#)).

Traditionally, only the emperor was allowed to wear robes depicting all twelve of these symbols. The empress could wear five (sun, moon, stars, *fú*, and axe), and the crown prince, two (sun and moon), but during the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a deterioration in adherence to the dress regulations and we find both men’s and women’s robes with two, four, eight, or even twelve of these ancient symbols.<sup>37</sup>

There are so many dragon robes in existence that one might be tempted into thinking that they are all alike, but they are, in fact, highly varied and the subject of dragon robes is a topic that has held the attention of many textile historians.<sup>38</sup> For the casual museum visitor, be aware that there are often other figures and symbols embroidered on the robes or in the robes’ designs that will reveal the season and/or special event associated with the robe.<sup>39</sup>

## LARGE NUMBERS

Any large gathering of good luck symbols portrayed in a painting or on porcelain, be they Buddhist, Daoist, or general symbols of success and prosperity, is generally referred to as the Hundred Antiques motif (*bǎigǔtú* 百古图) regardless of whether the objects actually total **100**. Motifs utilized by Chinese embroiderers in creating patterns of 100 include butterflies and cranes, lucky characters, etc. One particular pattern, known as *bǎishòutú* (百寿图), consists of 100 renderings of the character *shòu* (寿, “longevity”), in 100 different calligraphy styles, extending the wish “many-fold” (see p. [4](#)). Sometimes the characters form a simple square; sometimes they form one large *shòu* character. Many snuff bottles were also produced for use in the Qing court with such a motif.





Figs. 521, 522 Front and back of an imperial dragon robe known as a *lóngpao* with nine dragons and the Twelve Imperial Symbols. 1760–95, reign of the Emperor Qiánlóng. Courtesy of the Chris Hall Collection Trust (on loan to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore).



Fig. 523 On the left shoulder, the sun, represented by a red disk containing a three-legged bird.



Fig. 524 On the right shoulder, the moon, represented by a greenish-white disk depicting the hare that lives on the moon, with her mortar and pestle.





Fig. 525 At the neckline, the stars, sometimes referred to as “the constellation,” representing the heavens and depicted by seven stars in the late Ming but only three circles connected by thin lines in the Qing.



Fig. 526 At the neckline, the mountains (or rocks), representing stability and the earth.



Fig. 527 At waist height, a pair of small five-clawed dragons.



Fig. 528 At waist height, the “flowery fowl,” sometimes identified as a golden pheasant and sometimes as the mysterious “red bird” of legend. Together with the pair of dragons, these symbolized the birds and beasts of the natural world.



Fig. 529 At waist height, the *fǔ*, sometimes described as back-to-back bows, symbolizing the dualistic forces of good and evil and representing the emperor’s power to judge.



Fig. 530 At waist height, an axe head to symbolize the emperor’s temporal powers to make decisions and to punish.

The number 100 should always be interpreted as “many.” For example, “100

things” (*bǎishì* 百事) means “everything.” Mao Zedong was not calling for 100 dissidents when he decreed, “Let a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend.” He was simply calling forth all the dissidents to voice their opinions (so he could later silence them).

In a similar vein, **10,000** (*wàn* 万) means “countless, unlimited.” For example, a brave general would be feted as “a general of 1,000 armies and 10,000 horses,”<sup>[40](#)</sup> and the emperor, “Lord of 10,000 Years.” Misunderstanding the symbolic meaning of these numbers has resulted in several errors in Chinese studies as some students have taken the figures literally rather than figuratively, for example, in describing the length of a hall or the number of archers in an attacking army.



Fig. 531 At knee height on the skirt of the robe, a pair of ceremonial cups or goblets, during the Ming decorated with a monkey and a tiger, but later during the Qing, a pair of animals resembling monkeys, representing the element “metal.”

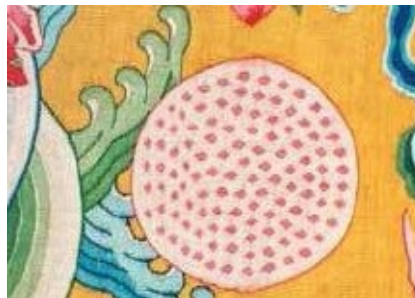


Fig. 532 At knee height on the skirt of the robe, grain or millet to represent all growing things or the element “wood.”



Fig. 533 At knee height on the skirt of the robe, aquatic grass to represent the element “water.”



Fig. 534 At knee height on the skirt of the robe, red flames to represent the element “fire.”

Some scholars believe that the swastika was “the ancient form of the character *fāng* (方), meaning the four directions of the world. Later, from about 700 AD, it came to represent the number ten thousand.”<sup>41</sup> There is an archaic character for 10,000 on ancient Shang scripts and oracle bones – but it clearly depicts a scorpion.

One homophone for the number 10,000 (*wàn* 万) is *wàn* (蔓), meaning any “tendriled foliage or vine,” which is why a vine (see p. [40](#)) intensifies the



symbolism of the flowers or fruit or whatever it entwines by amplifying the meaning “countless times.”



Fig. 535 An example of “pondweed” as it appears on ceramics, here with a variety of fish and lotus.

Some groupings seem to be independent of set numbers. One example is the group known as *bóg ŭ* (博古), sometimes translated as “many ancient things,” which shows a collection of antiquities, usually some ancient bronzes, a vase, pieces of jade, a censer, a jar, etc. (see Fig. [480](#)). It is said that this pattern evolved during the Northern Song Period (960–1126), when the Emperor Huīzōng (徽宗), who was a great collector of antiques, ordered a compendium made of all the court’s antiques. Thereafter, this pattern has “become the symbol of the family of great wealth with a lucky meaning.”<sup>[42](#)</sup>





Fig. 536 These children are enacting one of the scenes from the epic novel *Journey to the West*, which records the adventures of the Monkey King (played by the boy standing on a rock holding a “magic staff”) and his companions. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> For this reason, during the Qing Dynasty, even numbers were considered inauspicious. One clear manifestation of this were the sets of personal grooming tools that were carefully composed of three, five, or seven tools during this period. Margaret Duda, *Four Centuries of Silver: Personal Adornment in the Qing Dynasty and After*, Singapore: Times Editions, 2002, p. [48](#).
- <sup>2</sup> Florence Ayscough, *A Chinese Mirror: Being Reflections of the Reality behind Appearance*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1925, p. [65](#).
- <sup>3</sup> This message was brought home to my husband and me in Shanghai in the mid-1980s. While searching separately through thousands of items in a huge multi-storied warehouse of Chinese antiques, we each, on different floors, chanced upon a very common but pretty blue dish decorated with white cranes. We found it amusing that we had each found and selected the identical item but figured it was probably the 1920 equivalent of a Walmart vase today (i.e. tens of thousands had been made and we had chanced upon two survivors). “A pair! A pair!” shouted the warehouse owner in glee. “We didn’t know we had a pair!” and then proceeded to charge us four times the price of the two single pieces for having the

privilege of purchasing “a pair.” To view “half of the pair,” see Fig. [124](#).

- [4](#) Para. 13. Interestingly, the symbols of sun, moon, and stars still figure as an integral part of the design of the minority Naxi people’s national dress in southwest China.
- [5](#) Readers interested in this topic should turn to one of the larger volumes on religious imagery listed in the Bibliography.
- [6](#) There is some confusion over these groupings of animals as the grouping evolved over time, and thus listings can differ. There is a grave in Henan from approximately 3000 BCE where cowrie shells shaped like a tiger lie to the west of the grave and a cowrie shell dragon to the east. A seventh-century BCE mirror marks the four directions as two tigers, a stag, and a bird. A casket from the fifth century BCE depicts star maps with a tiger in the west and a dragon in the east. During the Qin and Han Dynasties, the four directional animals were used to decorate tiles and bricks in palaces and tombs. By the early Western Han, these animals decorated both coffins and tombs. In Tomb 1 at Mawangdui, the *sì líng*, comprised at that time of the dragon, tiger, phoenix, and deer, are illustrated on the inner coffin of Lady Dai (d. 186 BCE). In 130 BCE, the Han Emperor Wǔdì formally adopted a correspondence between the directions and their symbolic animals known as the *sishen* or “four deities.” Some of the earliest large tomb bricks decorated with the four animals are found in his tomb at Maoling. China Institute Gallery. <http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/shandong/28.html>
- [7](#) However, due to the precession of the equinoxes, the December solstice no longer takes place while the sun is in Capricorn.
- [8](#) There was little standardization in early translations of these groupings so many variants exist. Careful readers will learn to recognize them over time. For example, this grouping has also been translated as the Four Attributes of the Scholar, or the Four Elegant Occupations, or just the Four Arts. One of the reasons I have included the original Chinese names for the most important groupings is to help readers navigate these rough seas.
- [9](#) The Four Books (*sishū* 四书) are *The Analects of Confucius* (*Lùnyǔ* 论语), *The Great Learning* (*Dàxué* 大学), *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhōngyōng* 中庸), and the works of *Mencius* (*Mèngzǐ* 孟子).
- [10](#) “Rocks, pools, pavilions and bamboos – may be considered as the pillars of a garden upon which everything else rests.” Ayscough, *A Chinese Mirror*, p. [221](#), quoting a retired officer of the Board of Rites, Beijing, 1559 ce.
- [11](#) The term “liver and gall” is still used to describe courage.
- [12](#) T. C. Lai (ed.), *Things Chinese*, Hong Kong: Swindon Book Company, 1971, p. [61](#).
- [13](#) An excellent example were the robes shown in the summer 2004 textile exhibition of the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney that featured five ancient mystical symbols representing the five sacred peaks guarding the five conceptual directions of the universe. See Judith Rutherford and Jackie Menzies (eds.), *Celestial Silks: Chinese Religious and Court Textiles*, exhibition catalogue, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004, pp. [54–7](#).
- [14](#) The *I Ching* (but known today in modern Pinyin as the *Yìjīng* (易經, *Book of Changes*); the *Shūjīng* (書經, *Book of History*); the *Shījīng* (詩經, *Book of Poetry*); the *Lǐ jì* (禮記, *Book of Rites*), and the *Chūnqiū* (春秋, *Spring and Autumn Annals*), attributed to Confucius. (I have retained the complex characters in

these names as it does not seem fitting to transpose the names of these classic texts into their simplified character counterparts, although I have used their modern Pinyin transliterations.) <sup>15</sup> Jessica Rawson, *Chinese Jade: From the Neolithic to the Qing*, London: British Museum Press, 1995, p. 335.

<sup>16</sup> “Because it occurred during a month that was prone to the proliferation of pests and diseases that might be associated with the hot season, the Dragon Boat Festival was also associated with efforts to dispel the effects of disease and infestations.” See Beverley Jackson and David Hugus, *Ladder to the Clouds: Intrigue and Tradition in Chinese Rank*, Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 1999, p. <sup>113</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Zhou Xun and Gao Chunming. *5000 Years of Chinese Costumes*, Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1984, p. <sup>174</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> *Costumes of the Ch'ing Dynasty: A Display of the Beauty of Embroidery*, Taipei, Taiwan: National Museum of History, 1988, p. <sup>18</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Hellmut Wilhelm (trans. Gary F. Baynes), *Change: Eight Lectures on the I Ching*, New York: Harper & Row, 1960, p. <sup>37</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Chinese classical art used to be discussed in terms of the Six Principles of Painting, said to have existed from early times. “The first is, that through a vitalizing spirit, a painting should possess the movement of life. The second is, that by means of the brush, the structural basis should be established. The third is, that the representation should so conform with the objects as to give their likenesses. The fourth is, that the colouring should be applied according to their characteristics. The fifth is, that through organization place and position should be determined. The sixth is, that by copying the ancient models should be perpetuated.” Hsieh Ho, “Notes Concerning the Classification of Old Paintings,” in Shio Sakanishi (trans.), *The Spirit of the Brush: Being the Outlook of Chinese Painters on Nature from Eastern Chin to Five Dynasties AD 317–960*, London: John Murray, 1939, pp. <sup>50–1</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> The traditional Chinese calendar, known as the *Huánglì* (黃曆, was abolished in 1911 with the birth of Republican China.

<sup>22</sup> Roberta Helmer Stalberg and Ruth Nesi, *China's Crafts: The Story of How They're Made and What They Mean*, New York: Eurasia Press, 1980, p. <sup>80</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> Chinese culinary delights also has its group of Eight Treasures or Eight Precious Things (*bābǎo* 八宝, bear's paw, deer's tail, lark's tongue, torpedo roe, camel's hump, monkey's lip, carp's tail, and beef marrow), Eight Treasure Pickles, Eight Treasure Tea, and Eight Treasure Rice. Chinese New Year sweets are served in special eight-compartment trays sometimes known as the “New Year Tray of Togetherness” (*hènián quánhé* 贺年全盒), each compartment designed to hold a snack that symbolizes good fortune.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Sotheby's, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, auction catalogue, New York, March 23, 2004, p. <sup>86</sup>, lot #187.

<sup>25</sup> Zhou Xun and Gao Chunming, *5000 Years of Chinese Costumes*, p. <sup>77</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. <sup>130</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> *Clothed to Rule the Universe: Ming and Qing Dynasty Textiles at the Art Institute of Chicago*, Chicago, Illinois: The Art Institute of Chicago in association with University of Washington Press, 2000, p. <sup>25</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> To understand why four represents the feminine and five the masculine, see Wilhelm, *Change: Eight*

*Lectures on the I Ching*, Ch. 4.

[29 http://www.bjinvest.gov.cn/english/general/index05.jsp](http://www.bjinvest.gov.cn/english/general/index05.jsp).

[30](#) In Chinese, *jiǔ shì tóngjū* (九世同居).

[31](#) Lydia Chen, *Chinese Knotting*, Taipei: Echo Publishing, 1981, p. [86](#).

[32](#) Cammann, *China's Dragon Robes*, p. [85](#).

[33](#) Zhao Feng, "Symbols of Power and Prestige: Sun, Moon, Dragon and Phoenix Motifs on Silk Textiles," in Wong Hwei Lian and Szan Tan (eds.), *Power Dressing: Textiles for Rulers and Priests from the Chris Hall Collection*, exhibition catalogue, Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2006, p. [41](#).

[34](#) Gary Dickinson and Linda Wrigglesworth, *Imperial Wardrobe*, Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 2000, p. [88](#).

[35](#) Cammann, *China's Dragon Robes*, p. [88](#).

[36](#) Visitors to Beijing's Forbidden City can find this pattern on the ceilings of several of the main structures, for example, the Protection of Harmony Hall and the ceiling of the Supreme Harmony Gate. The pondweed (sometimes called pondweed-well) motif was used on ceilings to ward off fire as it represents water.

[37](#) Dickinson and Wrigglesworth, *Imperial Wardrobe*, p. [93](#).

[38](#) An excellent introduction to this subject is *Clothed to Rule the Universe*. See also Cammann, *China's Dragon Robes* and Dickinson and Wrigglesworth, *Imperial Wardrobe*.

[39](#) A beautiful example of such a robe borrowed from a private collection was shown in the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, Summer/Autumn 2004 at a special exhibition of Chinese textiles. See Judith Rutherford, "Celestial Silks," *Arts of Asia*, Vol. 34, No. 4, p. [38](#). This article quotes the *History of the Ming Palace* "written by Liu Jo-ju, a eunuch at the Ming court, [that] clearly documents that it was customary for dragon robes to have additional symbols to identify the particular festival for which the garment was to be worn."

[40](#) Ichisada Miyazaki (trans. Conrad Schirokauer), *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, p. [31](#).

[41](#) Meher McArthur, *Reading Buddhist Art: An Illustrated Guide to Buddhist Signs and Symbols*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002, p. [129](#).

[42](#) 段建华, 中国吉祥装饰设计 [Duàn Jiàn huá, *Chinese Auspicious Decoration Design*], 北京: 中国轻工业出版社 [May 1, 1999], p. [53](#).





Fig. 537 A painted bodhi leaf depicting a seated figure of Dàrìrúlái on a flowering lotus. The auspiciousness of the painting is enhanced by the vines and flaming “halo” sphere. From the 1,600-year-old Temple of the Soul’s Retreat (Língyīnshì), Hangzhou, one of the largest Buddhist temples in southeast China.



## Chapter 16

# RELIGIOUS IMAGES AND SYMBOLS

In the beginning, both Daoism and Buddhism used non-figurative, aniconic symbols that were identifiable to their followers rather than depictions of their respective founders (Lǎo Zi and Sakyamuni Buddha). These objects also recalled important events and beliefs and thus served an educational role. Over time, however, both founders were deified and a pantheon of other gods and immortals, bodhisattvas, and sages were added. But because of these early pictorial roots, it is important to be able to recognize some of these early symbols as they were adopted virtually wholesale wherever the two religions spread. Below is a brief introduction to the most important ones that have made their way into China's decorative and religious arts.

## DAOIST SYMBOLS

### YĪN AND YANG

A fundamental concept in Chinese philosophy is that of *yīn* (阴) and *yáng* (阳), whose roots can be traced back to the fourth century BCE (Fig. [538](#)).<sup>1</sup> In its simplest form, *yīn* and *yáng* are depicted by the “Supreme Ultimate” circle known as the *tàijí* (太极), differentiated into two equal halves by a sinuous S-shaped line, one side of which is black, the other most commonly white, but sometimes also red. A small circle of the complementary color is positioned in the center of each half. Sometimes two entwined fish form the sphere. This symbol represents the Daoist belief in the cyclic flow of the Dao from which all else emerges.



Fig. 538 *Yīn* is represented by the dark, *yáng* by the light.

*Yīn* and *yáng* represent the polarity of all life's forces – the dark and the light, the cold and the hot, the wet and the dry, the female and the male; *yīn* representing the dark, wet, inactive, and weak, *yáng* the light, dry, dynamic, and strong. Sexually, *yáng* is the male, *yīn* the female. Seasonally, the winter and summer solstices correspond to the rise and decline of the two forces, with *yīn* at its peak during the winter solstice and *yáng* during the summer solstice. The moon is *yīn*, the sun *yáng*. They should not be understood as opposites but as polarities forming a balanced harmonious whole, and in recognition of this, there is the symbolic dot of each in the exact center of its counterpart. “The thinking in terms of polarities is fundamentally different from the conception of antithesis in the thought and art of the Near East. There light and dark are at war with one another, whereas in China there is a friendly exchange.”<sup>2</sup>

## EIGHT TRIGRAMS

From *yīn* and *yáng* spring all else, a concept that the Chinese explain through the evolution of the Eight Trigrams (*bāguà* 八卦) (Figs. [539](#), [540](#)). Each trigram consists of three lines, broken or unbroken, and represents one of the eight different combinations that can be made of three broken or unbroken lines. The solid lines represent *yang*, the broken lines *yīn*. Each of the eight basic trigrams has a symbolic meaning and is associated with an animal, a direction, and a natural force, progressing rationally from the three solid lines that represent heaven to the three broken lines that represent earth.

When these eight trigrams are paired, they create the sixty-four hexagrams, the traditional basis of all things to the Chinese, including science, medicine, and

even future events. China’s divination classic, the *Yijing* (易经, *Book of Changes*), is based upon the bipolarities of *yīn* and *yáng* and the sixty-four hexagrams. Its earliest recorded usage dates back to the seventh century BCE.



Fig. 539 A paper charm from rural southwest China showing the eight trigrams, each consisting of three lines. On the east side of the diagram are the characters for “white tiger” (*bái hǔ*) and on the west side the characters for “green dragon” (*qīng lóng*). These are the reverse of their normal positions. Two swastikas are in the north and south positions. In the corners on the right-hand side (from top down) are the two characters that read *bā guà* (eight trigrams) and in the left corners (from top down) are the two characters that read *jiǔ gōng* (nine modes of ancient Chinese music).



Fig. 540 This very large bell has the eight trigrams around its lower edge just under a diaper (or border) of stylized swastikas. It is separated from a meander band by a ring of “pearls.” The single large character that can be seen shows a stylized woman under a roof (安) and is the character for “peace” (*ān*).

### The Eight Trigrams with Their Principal Attributes

☰	☷	☳	☴	☱	☲	☵	☶
<i>qian</i> <sup>3</sup>	<i>chen</i>	<i>kan</i>	<i>ken</i>	<i>tui</i>	<i>li</i>	<i>sun</i>	<i>k'un</i>
father	eldest son	middle son	youngest son	youngest daughter	middle daughter	eldest daughter	mother

heaven, the sky	thunder	water, clouds and rain; the moon, a pit	hills, mountains	quiet water bodies (deep lakes, swamps, marshes)	flames, lightning, fire, the sun	the wind, wood	earth
power, strength	movement, excitement	peril, difficulty, dangerous	rest, immovable, perverse	pleasure, satisfaction	brightness, elegance, clinging	flexibility, penetration, gentle	submission, passive, yielding
strong black	dark yellow	blood red				white	deep red
horse <sup>4</sup>	dragon	pig	dog	goat/sheep	pheasant	cock <sup>5</sup>	ox

As an art motif, the eight trigrams are one of the oldest representations found in traditional Chinese folk art. Their depiction on ancient pottery and carvings represents the harmony of all nature and life itself. There is magic in all this, something not lost on a modern-day Asian who hangs an octagonal plaque of the *yīn/yáng* motif surrounded by the eight trigrams to ward off evil in his office or home.

A rare carved red glass snuff bottle attributed to the Beijing Palace Workshops (1740–80) depicts a *yīn/yáng* symbol on rolling waves below pairs of triple stars and symbols of the sun and moon. When combined with the snuff bottle itself, meaning both “bottle” (*píng* 瓶) and “peace” (*píng* 平), the overall design forms the rebus “peace throughout the four seas both day and night”<sup>6</sup> (see VASES p. [263](#)).



Fig. 541 Outlines in place, but not yet embroidered, are the eight Daoist symbols, each representing one of the Eight Immortals. Clockwise from bottom right: semi-embroidered lotus, sword, basket of flowers, flute, gourd, castanets, fan, musical instrument. Back protective neck flap of a child's hat (see Fig. [347](#)).

The eight trigrams, and the significance Chinese philosophers and the Daoist School placed on the search for immortality, has resulted in eight being a symbolically significant number in Chinese thought and art (see p. [228](#)). It is no coincidence that there are Eight Immortals (see p. [182](#)) and not seven or nine.

## **EIGHT DAOIST SYMBOLS**

The Eight Daoist Symbols are the objects associated with each of the Eight Immortals (see p. [182](#)) – a fan, sword, flower basket, lotus, flute, gourd, castanets, and a bamboo percussion instrument (Fig. [541](#)). While originally distinctly associated with immortality, today they are popularly understood only as good luck emblems. They usually appear embellished with ribbons to show their magical powers, and are sometimes combined with sprays of flowers.

## **FIVE SACRED MOUNTAINS OF DAOISM**

These are Tàishān (泰山) in Shandong Province in the east, considered the most sacred of the five; Héngshān (衡山) in Hunan Province in the south, famous for its scenery and many Buddhist shrines; Huàshān (华山) in Shaanxi Province in the west; Héngshān (恆山) in Shanxi and Hebei Provinces in the north, famous as the one-time home of one of the Eight Immortals, Zhāng Guǒlǎo; and Sōngshān (嵩山), the “Peak of the Center” with its seventy-two slopes, in Henan Province, famous as the home of the Shàolín (少林) Monastery and Temple. The word *shān* (山) means “mountain”. (See also chart p. [110](#) and the FOUR SACRED MOUNTAINS OF BUDDHISM below.)

## **BUDDHIST SYMBOLS**

### **BEGGING BOWL**

A large, round bowl without a rim or foot, with or without an attached strap, as was carried by the historical Buddha and all subsequent Buddhist monks and nuns, was one of the earliest symbols of Buddhism. This is a begging bowl, and one of the means by which Buddhist devotees may gain merit by providing food to those in religious orders.



## **BODHI LEAF**

The fan-shaped “halo” often surrounding a seated or standing Buddha is usually in the shape of a bodhi leaf, representing the tree under which the historical Buddha gained enlightenment (Figs. [537](#), [542](#)).

A bodhi leaf, eight-spoked wheel, seated deer, and simple footprint to symbolize the physical presence of the Buddha, are all early aniconic symbols of Buddhism.

## **BUDDHA’S FOOTPRINT**

Impressions of a footprint, attributed to the historical Buddha, often engraved with other early signs of Buddhism such as the swastika, an eight-spoked wheel, etc. (Fig. [543](#)).

## **DEER, SEATED**

Because the historical Buddha gave his first sermon in a deer park at Sarnath in northern India, the depiction of seated deer represents this important event (Fig. [544](#)). The first sermon is known in Buddhism as “Setting into Motion the Wheel of Dharma.” It was in this sermon that the Buddha introduced “The Middle Way,” a doctrine that was to represent the Buddhist approach to salvation or enlightenment. Tibetan Buddhism usually portrays two seated deer facing one another with the Wheel of the Law with its eight spokes between them (see Fig. [240](#)).



Fig. 542 A bodhi leaf-shaped miniature fan with a Lantsa character.



Fig. 543 The Theravada impression (popular in Thailand and Sri Lanka) of a Buddha's Footprint, where four layers are superimposed to represent Sakyamuni plus three other Buddhas of the Past who, although smaller in stature than their predecessors, have walked in exactly the same steps. Gold footprint of the Four Buddhas created by the Siam Society to honor Queen Sirikit of Thailand, now enshrined in a hall in the Emerald Buddha Temple, Bangkok. Photo courtesy of Eileen Deeley.

## EIGHT BUDDHIST SYMBOLS OR EMBLEMS

The Eight Buddhist Symbols or Emblems or Auspicious Objects or Treasures (*bājíxiàng* 八吉相) are eight objects associated with the life or teachings of the historical Buddha that were used as educational and proselytizing tools during Buddhism's early years (Figs. [545-547](#)).

Introduced into China during the Mongolian Yuan Dynasty (1209–1368),<sup>7</sup> today their religious symbolism has been partially supplanted by more pragmatic interpretations. To many, they are understood only as the Eight Lucky Objects, with secular meanings that the Buddha (who believed that desire was the cause of the pain of existence) would have abhorred. They are often depicted with elaborate ribbons emanating from them, which indicate their auspicious and miraculous properties.



Fig. 544 Seated deer beside a wheel always represent the Buddha's first sermon in a deer park in Sarnath, near Benares. This theme decorates the beam of the Songzanlin Temple in Zhongdian, southwest China.



Fig. 545 A row of eight altar ornaments depicting the Eight Buddhist Symbols in the Ming Dynasty order, from right to left: flaming wheel, conch shell, state canopy, ceremonial umbrella, flowering lotus, jar, pair of fish, endless knot. Temple of the Azure Clouds, western hills, Beijing. Courtesy of Smitthi Siribhadra.



Fig. 546 This protective doorway covering at the Songzanlin Temple in Zhongdian, Yunnan, displays a number of Buddhist and Chinese symbols: at each bottom corner, the character *shòu*; directly above, the same character but in a different style; to its side and above the door opening, an endless knot. Conch shells, deer, and the Wheel of Law are found in the top row.



Fig. 547 The Eight Buddhist Symbols sit atop this tiled temple roof, the dragon known as a *Chīwēn* on each end. The order is classic Qing. Left to right: umbrella, fish, jar, lotus, conch shell, endless knot, canopy, and wheel. Courtesy of Smitthi Siribhadra.

A **flaming) wheel** (*lún* 轮), or the Wheel of the Law (*fǎlún* 法轮) as it is sometimes called, represents the most basic Buddhist belief that life as known is an unbroken chain of births and rebirths brought about by our desire for permanence in a world characterized by impermanence (Fig. 550). The result of this “wrong thinking” is spiritual pain. The teachings of the Buddha help followers break this chain. By living a life according to the Wheel of the Law, believers can attain the enlightened state known as *nirvana*, in which all desire, and hence all suffering, ceases.

If a sole wheel is depicted, such as a carving on a stele, you can discern between the Hindu and Buddhist symbol by counting the spokes. Hindu wheels typically have twelve spokes, one for each of the twelve signs of the Zodiac, whereas the wheel found in Buddhist art has eight spokes, each representing one tenet of the Buddha’s teachings (the Eightfold Path). These are right understanding, right thinking, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation – the code of behavior that forms the basis of a moral life in Buddhism. Buddhist wheels are often accompanied by seated deer in memory of the Buddha’s first sermon in a deer park.



Fig. 548 A real conch shell, luxuriously decorated with silver, turquoise, and other semiprecious stones. A dragon and other animals are incorporated in the design. Purchased in Yunnan.



Fig. 549 A pair of fish decorate this small metal container.

The **conch shell** (*luó* 螺 or *hǎiluó* 海螺) is borrowed from older Hindu beliefs and ceremonies where it was a symbol of royalty. In Buddhism, it symbolizes the pure and true teachings of the Buddha or what is sometimes referred to as “the proclamation of the *dharmā*”; it is also a symbol of the Buddha’s voice and is used to call worshippers together (Fig. [554](#)). Conch shells embellished with silverwork and semiprecious stones are commonly found in Tibet and surrounding areas of the Himalayas (Fig. [548](#)).

White conch shells are still used in religious ceremonies throughout the Hindu and Buddhist world, especially in the Himalayas, where the blowing of the conch shell during a ceremony represents the spread of the Buddha’s teachings throughout the world. Highly prized and extremely valuable, conch shells were used in ancient times as trumpets to signal victory, each “hero of mythical warfare carry[ing] a mighty white conch shell, which often bore a personal name.”<sup>8</sup> It is easy to understand their transformation from symbols of sovereignty and authority, into symbols of religious authority. Interestingly, conch shells can spiral either right or left (as one looks down on the shell from above with the lower opening at the bottom), and as those that spiral to the right are extremely rare, they were considered especially auspicious. When depicted as one of the eight symbols, the conch is always shown as a right-spiraling shell. Careful observers will note that the Buddha’s curls, navel, and *urna* also spiral to the right.



The **state canopy** (*gài* 盖), also borrowed from Hinduism, symbolizes spiritual authority, victory over ignorance (attainable through the teachings of the Buddha), and the protection the Buddha's teachings offer (Fig. [557](#)).

The **ceremonial umbrella** (*sǎn* 伞) denotes nobility or royalty. Buddha was born into a princely family that he rejected in search of religious truth (Fig. [555](#)). The umbrella also honors the nobility of the teachings themselves.



Fig. 550 The flaming wheel. Detail from a Buddhist painting purchased in Bhutan.



Fig. 551 The jar or vase.

The flowering **lotus** (*liánhuā* 莲花) symbolizes the purity of the teachings of Buddhism as well as the more secular symbolism of harmony, distinguishable from its Daoist counterpart by being in full flower with eight open petals (Fig. [556](#)); the Daoist rendition of a lotus more typically shows it in profile on a stem.

The **jar or vase** (*píng* 井瓦) originally held the “elixir of heaven,” an elixir that heals all and even grants immortality, the ultimate triumph over birth and death (Fig. 551). Its homophone (*píng* 井瓦) allows for the simultaneous translation of “eternal harmony” (see VASES p. 263).

A **pair of fish** (*shuāngyú* 双鱼), understood by most modern Chinese to be a symbol for marital happiness, is one of the oldest symbols found in Chinese art (Fig. 549), dating as far back as the Neolithic Age. It may have evolved from or be related to fertility beliefs or the intertwined symbols of *yīn* and *yang*.<sup>9</sup> In Buddhism, a pair of fish expresses the freedom and happiness that “true (Buddhist) knowledge” can bring, akin to that of fish swimming free (Fig. 553, 558). This symbol is also associated with other fish in Chinese art, for example, as a rebus meaning “abundance” or “material prosperity” (see FISH p. 96).



Fig. 552 The endless knot.



Fig. 553 A pair of fish.



Fig. 554 **The conch shell.**



Fig. 555 **The ceremonial umbrella or victory banner.**

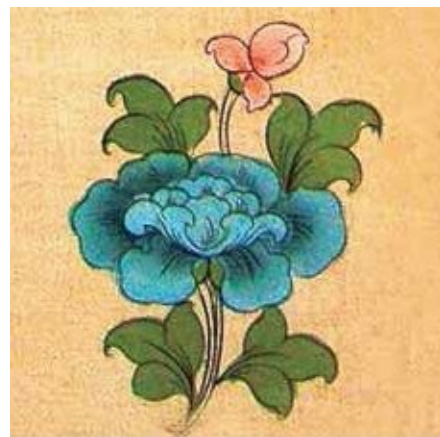


Fig. 556 **The flowering lotus.**



Fig. 557 **The state canopy.**

The **endless knot** (*jié* 结 or *páncháng* 盘长) originally symbolized the cyclical nature of all existence, the futility of life coursing without end, a chain that can be broken through heeding the teachings of the Buddha who shows endless compassion. In popular Chinese folk tradition, it came to be associated with Buddhism in general as well as longevity, magical Daoism's primary objective (Figs. [552](#), [559](#)). It remains a popular symbol.

The Eight Buddhist Symbols are commonly found as textile and decorative art designs. It was, for example, at one time a court tradition for the emperor to present small embroidered purses decorated with motifs of the eight symbols to the senior officials who worked in the palace. Some of these purses may still be seen in private and museum collections. The Eight Buddhist Symbols can also appear as sets of cloisonné enamel, porcelain, and silver objects.

The order in which these symbols are depicted can be useful in dating the artifact on which they appear. The above order was used in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644); in the Qing (1644–1911), it changed to umbrella, fish, jar, lotus, conch shell, endless knot, canopy, and wheel.<sup>[10](#)</sup>



Fig. 558 A wax resist pattern of a pair of fish, of the Miao minority people of Guizhou.



Fig. 559 The endless knot carved in stone at the Temple of the Soul's Retreat, Hangzhou.



Fig. 560 Yak tails await passing motorists along a highway in southwest China's Yunnan Province.

**FLY WHISK**



The willow branch-shaped horse or yak tail fly whisk (*chénwěi* 尘尾), commonly held by both bodhisattvas and such popular figures as Daoism's Eight Immortals, symbolizes for Buddhists "the concept of the bodhisattva being filled with such love for all creatures that he would harm not even a fly but would wave it away,"<sup>11</sup> as well as the spiritual leadership and special magical powers of the Daoist sages (Fig. [560](#)). When the Manchu Emperor Yǒngzhèng (雍正, r. 1723–35) commissioned a portrait of himself as a Daoist sage, he was painted holding a yak's tail fly whisk to help viewers identify the role he was playing.<sup>12</sup> Fly whisks were also regarded as a general symbol of grace and elegance and were, at one time, an important fashion accessory carried by both men and women.

## FOUR SACRED MOUNTAINS OF BUDDHISM

The four sacred mountains of Buddhism, each associated with a different Buddhist deity, are Pǔ tuóshān (普陀山, Buddhist mountain of the East, associated with Guānyīn, 观音, Bodhisattva of Compassion, but more commonly referred to in China as the Goddess of Mercy); Wǔ tái shān (五台山, Buddhist mountain of the North, associated with Manjusri, Bodhisattva of Wisdom, known in Chinese as Wénshū); Jiǔ huāshān (九华山, Buddhist mountain of the South, associated with Kshitigarbha, the bodhisattva known as the Savior of the Damned); and Éméishān (峨眉山, Buddhist mountain of the West, associated with Samantabhadra, the Bodhisattva of Universal Virtue or Benevolence).

## LION

The lion is associated with Buddhism not only as a symbol of royal power but also as a guardian of the religion (see LION p. [561](#)). Some of the earliest Buddhist monuments, such as pillars, feature lions. The historical Buddha was often referred to as the "Lion of the Sakyas," acknowledging both his royal birth and spiritual power, and lions can be found at both Buddhist shrines (who can forget the magnificent lions guarding the Mahamuni Pagoda in Mandalay?) and guarding thrones. Manjusri is often portrayed seated on a lion (Fig. [435](#)).

## PRECIOUS JEWEL

The Precious Jewel or Wish-granting Jewel of Buddhism is usually round with a pointed top and often has horizontal bands. This is the *rúyì bǎozhū* (如意宝珠) held by several bodhisattvas – Kshitigarbha being the primary figure (see Fig. [442](#)), but also Samantabhadra (see Fig. [437](#)) – that represents spiritual wealth. It can appear alone or in a grouping of three. When it appears in a group of three, it is known as the Three Jewels of Buddhism (in Sanskrit *triratna* and in Chinese *sānbǎo* 三宝) and represents the Buddha, his teachings (*dharma*), and the monastic community (*sangha*) (Fig. [562](#)). Flames often surround the jewel or jewels, symbolizing the magical powers of Buddhism. Sometimes it appears more flower-like in appearance, almost as a small garland with three peaks. The *triratna* is a well-known motif found at most Buddhist sites, used as a wall decoration, decorating a footprint of the Buddha, etc.

## SWASTIKA

The swastika, an ancient religious symbol that actually predates Buddhism, came to represent Buddhism in China, complete virtue, and the Buddha himself (Figs. [563](#), [564](#)). It is believed by many to represent the “seed of Buddhahood in every sentient being’s soul, power over evil, and all favour to the good.”<sup>13</sup> When a swastika appears on the Buddha’s chest, it is understood to be “the symbol or seal of the Buddha’s heart and is believed to contain within it the whole mind of the Buddha.”<sup>14</sup> The swastika is one of the thirty-two auspicious signs of the historical Buddha (Sakyamuni) and its appearance on his chest makes him easy to identify in the Buddhist pantheon. The swastika also has a secular symbolism of good fortune (see SWASTIKA p. [261](#)).



Fig. 561 A pair of lions stands on either side of a flowering lotus at the base of this Northern Qi Dynasty (dated 484 CE) white marble statue of a teaching Buddha. Courtesy of Mathew Welch.



Fig. 562 Detail from a mural of the three “jewels” known as the *triratna* in Sanskrit and *sānbǎo* in Chinese, representing the Buddha, his teachings, and the monastic community. Detail from the Songzanlin Temple in Zhongdian, built in imitation of the Potala in Lhasa, Tibet.

## THUNDERBOLT

Two other inherited symbols are the holy thunderbolt (in Sanskrit, *vajra*) and the bell (in Sanskrit, *ghanta*). The *vajra* was originally associated with the Hindu god Indra and later adopted by Lamaist Buddhism, identifying an entire “family” of bodhisattvas, the most common being Vajrapani and Vajrasattva, each of whom is depicted holding a *vajra*. The thunderbolt, which does not resemble a typical Western “Zeus” thunderbolt of a zigzagged rod, but something more akin to a metal baby rattle with a crown-shaped object with prongs at each end, represents the power of knowledge over ignorance. In Buddhism, it represents the power of Buddhist knowledge and the indestructible “Truth of the Law which

nothing can destroy.”<sup>15</sup> *Vajra* can be “single” or “double” (*vishvavajra*), with two double-headed *vajra* crossed at 90-degree angles to produce a balanced object with four “crowns” yielding additional cosmic power. Flowers are often depicted in this double *vajra* position on objects such as Himalayan carpets and animal blankets. Each element of the *vajra* has its own symbolism.<sup>16</sup>

The **bell** was an attribute of the Hindu god Shiva, the Destroyer, as its ring symbolized the transitory nature of all things. It was adopted by Buddhism to call the faithful together for prayer. It thus symbolizes the Assembly of the Faithful as well as the transitory nature of all things.



Fig. 563 One of the characteristic identifying marks of Sakyamuni Buddha (the historical Buddha, the “sage of the Sakyas”) is that he is often portrayed with a swastika on his chest, understood to be the symbol or seal of the Buddha’s heart. Here the Buddha’s right hand is held in a teaching *mudra*, the touching of the thumb and forefinger forming a circle to represent perfection (enlightenment).



Fig. 564 A small Tibetan rug with a central medallion mandala-like design surrounded by four-petal flowers and two swastikas, with a meander pattern outer border and an inner thin “pearl drop” border. The four-petal floral motif is one of the most common and popular patterns on Tibetan rugs. Courtesy of Angela Soeteber.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Werner Speiser, *The Art of China: Spirit and Society*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1966, p. [24](#).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. [24](#).

<sup>3</sup> Because most of the texts that deal with trigrams are older and use the Wade-Giles System of transliteration, I have retained it here. The *Pīnyīn* names (from left) would be *qián* (乾), *zhèn* (震), *kǎn* (坎), *gèn* (艮), *duì* (兑), *lí* (离), *xùn* (巽), and *kūn* (坤).

<sup>4</sup> Readers who are surprised that this *yáng* trigram is not represented by the dragon are correct. “Originally, *Ch’ien* was the dragon, *K’un* the mare. Later, the horse in many forms stood for *Ch’ien* ... while the cow ... appeared as *K’un* ... indicat[ing] a historical development.” Hellmut Wilhelm (trans. Gary F. Baynes), *Change: Eight Lectures on the I Ching*, New York: Harper & Row, 1960, p. [40](#). The trigram representing the “eldest son” takes on the dragon as its symbol.



- [5](#) The cock was “the first step toward the phoenix, which later developed from it.” Ibid., p. [45](#).
- [6](#) Sotheby’s, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, auction catalogue, New York, March 23, 2004, p. [14](#).
- [7](#) Claudia Brown, *Weaving’s China’s Past: The Amy S. Clague Collection of Chinese Textiles*, exhibition catalogue, Phoenix, Arizona: Phoenix Art Museum, 2000, p. [43](#).
- [8](#) Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, London: Serindia Publications, n.d., p. [183](#).
- [9](#) See, for example, Yang Xianrang and Yang Yang, *Chinese Folk Art*, Beijing: New World Press, 2000, p. [16](#).
- [10](#) Zhou Lili, “Ciai bajixiangwen xintan” as quoted in Claudia Brown, *Weaving’s China’s Past: The Amy S. Clague Collection of Chinese Textiles*, exhibition catalogue, Phoenix, Arizona: Phoenix Art Museum, 2000, p. [86](#).
- [11](#) Hugo Munsterberg, *Chinese Buddhist Bronzes*, Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1967, p. [66](#).
- [12](#) This is one of thirteen different portraits the emperor had painted of himself in various costumes, including one where he is dressed as a Westerner, complete with wig and waistcoat! They comprise a small album most likely intended for private viewing, which is found in the collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing.
- [13](#) Lydia Chen, *Chinese Knotting*, Taipei: Echo Publishing, 1981, p. [44](#).
- [14](#) Meher McArthur, *Reading Buddhist Art: An Illustrated Guide to Buddhist Signs and Symbols*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002, p. [129](#).
- [15](#) Munsterberg, *Chinese Buddhist Bronzes*, p. [75](#).
- [16](#) See, for example, Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*.

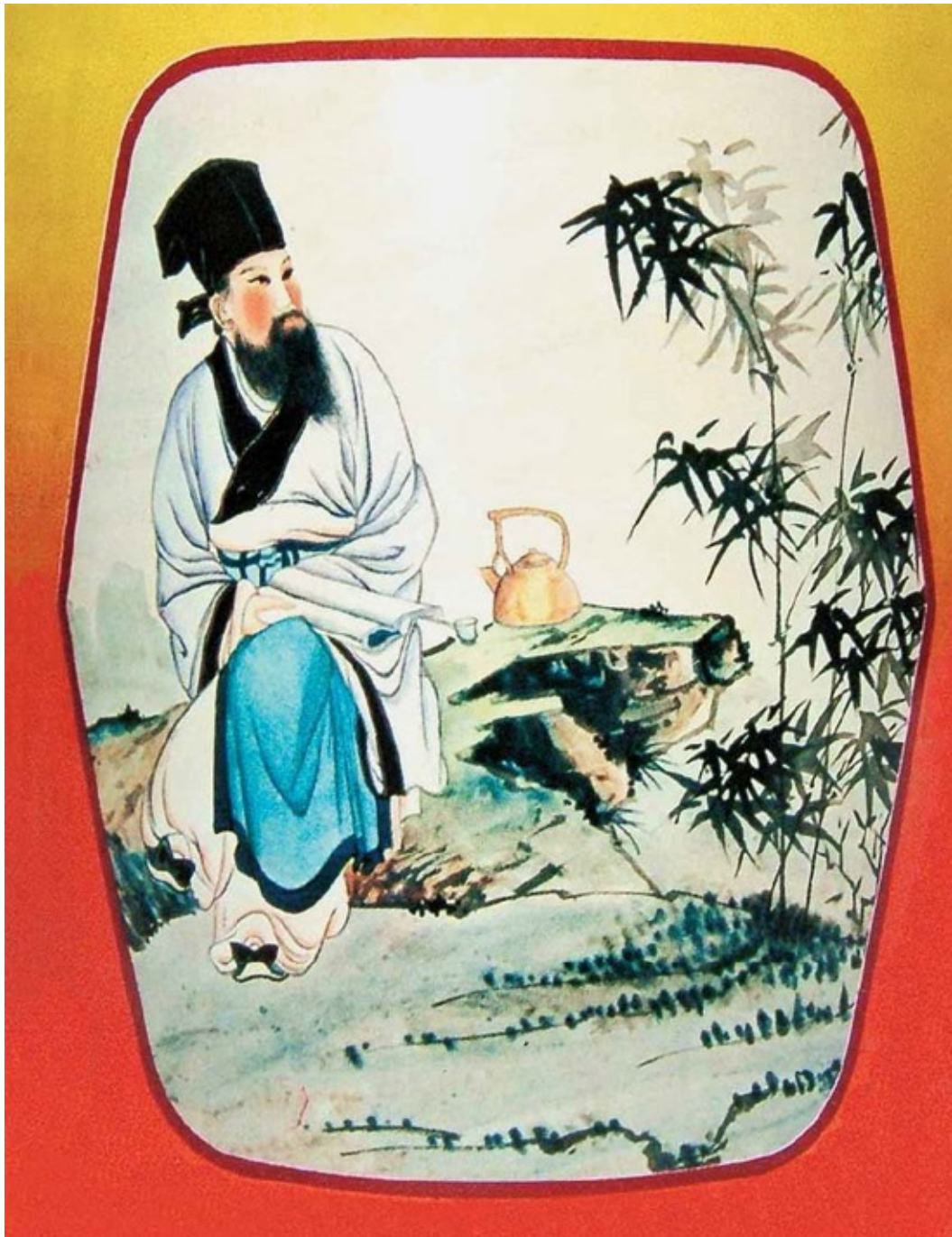


Fig. 565 Tea is China's most popular drink and a teapot (*hú*) is an everyday container, but the addition of the bamboo (*zhù*) to the scene tells us that there is the unspoken message from the manufacturer of this tea caddy of wishing (*zhù*) its customers "blessings" (*hù*).

## Chapter 17

# INANIMATE OBJECTS

There are always entries that do not fit neatly into any of the categories that have been researched and organized, such as with the previous chapters on flowering and non-flowering plants, insects, birds, animals, male and female personages, and religious symbols. Yet each of the entries below, presented in alphabetical order, will hopefully offer the intellectually curious additional insights or information into why an artist or artisan chose to include a specific item in their composition, or, if the object itself is on display in a museum collection (such as an ancient sets of bells), why it existed in the first place. These items are therefore, in short, little “ah ha!” glimpses into the wonderfully rich world we have entered when we study Chinese art or view Chinese collections.

## ARCHWAYS

Memorial archways, similar in appearance to Japanese stone *torii* at the entrances to temples, were constructed at the entrances to the homes of those candidates who placed in the top three positions of the final or imperial examinations that were the pathway to a career in China’s civil service. If there was insufficient space in front of the graduate’s home, the archway would sometimes be built at the entrance-way to his residential lane or street.<sup>1</sup> Spotting one of these archways in a painting tells you that you are viewing a residence that was the former home of a top-ranking scholar. Unfortunately, many of these commemorative arches were destroyed by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution.

## AXES

An axe often represents a go-between or the person who negotiates with the families of a potential bride and groom. Some scholars, including Williams, believe that “in fashioning an axe-handle it is necessary to have another as a model; in contracting a marriage it is necessary to have a go-between.”<sup>2</sup> An axe is

also the symbol of Lǚ Bān (鲁班), God of Carpenters (see p. [164](#)). See halberds p. [253](#) for the long-handled axes used as military weapons throughout Chinese history.

## BASKETS

Baskets are considered auspicious because they can hold many items and therefore represent abundance (see Fig. [119](#)), and in Chinese art inevitably hold such propitious objects as flowers or fruit with their respective auspicious meanings. It is therefore always important to identify what is being carried in the basket. A basket being held by a young person almost always identifies him/her as the Daoist Immortal Lán Cǎi hé (see p. [208](#)), although generic young children and gods of wealth also hold baskets of symbolic riches.

## BELLS

The large sets of bronze bells one finds on display in the Chinese galleries of large museums were musical instruments in Imperial China (Fig. [566](#)).<sup>3</sup> They had no clapper but were struck on the outside, either on the lip of the bell or a flat area. Each was tuned at a different tone and because they symbolized power and refinement and were used in ceremonies and court rituals, most were beautifully decorated. You will also find them depicted in traditional court paintings.

Bells were also believed to scare away potentially harmful ghosts and evil spirits. As a result, you will often spot more familiar small bells with clappers (*zhōng* 钟), physically attached to textiles and other domestic objects for this purpose. We even have bells “fashioned into tiger heads, function[ing] as baby rattles” to ensure their protective qualities.<sup>4</sup> Demon-scaring bells can also be found in the waves of some embroidered rank badges, often accompanied by scepters, stone chimes, and other good luck symbols. Cammann proposes that the combination of a bell and scepter on court textiles, a motif that was quite common in the Gūangxù Period (光绪 r. 1875–1908), but not before, is a pun evoking the name of the Demon Chaser Zhōng Kuí (钟馗)<sup>5</sup> (see p. [163](#)).



Fig. 566 Close-up of Warring States Period serial bells that were struck on the outside with a wooden hammer. Bells symbolize power and refinement and were used in court ceremonies.

Cascading bells are still a common component of Chinese folk jewelry and accessories,<sup>6</sup> such as the bells that adorn the hats worn by the Minority Hani women.<sup>7</sup> Some are also decorated with propitious symbols such as flowers or are fashioned as seeds to symbolize fertility.

Clay teapots have been fashioned in the shape of large bells for their same protective attributes,<sup>8</sup> although teapots have another meaning as well (see p. [262](#)).

Since the Chinese word for bell is also a pun on another *zhòng* (中) that means “hitting the mark,” bells also represent a successful ending, “as well as safekeeping”<sup>9</sup> (Fig. [567](#)).



Fig. 567 This Chinese New Year charm consists of three coins to represent the desire for wealth in the new year, plus three bells (*zhōng*) to add the meaning of “hitting the mark” (*zhòng*).

## BOATS



Boats (*chuán* 船) appear in a number of visual rebuses and are a clue to identifying the helmsman. (If there is a hat in the boat, see [HATS](#) p. [176](#)). If there are three or more figures in the boat, you may be viewing a rebus for “whole family” based on the similarities in pronunciation of boat (*chuán* 船) with a word that means “complete” (*quán* 全). “Boat [with] family” (*chuánjiā* 家) decoded would thus be understood as “the entire family” (*quánjiā* 全家). If there are other good luck omens in the picture or nearby, such as bats, the meaning is “happiness to the entire family”; the presence of magpies reads “the family anticipates good news.”

According to *Lu Ban's Secret Chart* (*Lǚ Bān Jīng* 鲁班经), a fifteenth-century carpenter's manual said to be authored by Lǚ Bān, the Patron of Carpentry<sup>10</sup> (see p. [164](#)), hiding a model boat with the bow pointing inwards in the eaves of a new house brought riches to the residents. See also [DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL](#) p. [169](#).

## BOOKS

Books (*shū* 书) symbolize the important Confucian virtues of erudition and learning and are one of the Eight Precious Things (see p. [228](#)) representing education and wisdom. A pair of books is a common symbol of the success that will come with study and diligence. Books or scrolls are also one of the four components of the Four Arts of the Scholar, together with paintings or scrolls, a musical instrument, and a chessboard (see p. [226](#)).

## BOWS AND ARROWS

Bows and arrows are the traditional hunting weapons of the male and a near universal symbol of male power and authority. A bow and arrows hanging above the door of a Mongolian *ger* were believed to protect it from evil,<sup>11</sup> while a bow and arrow have been long associated with the begetting of a son in Chinese folklore and symbolism.<sup>12</sup> It was “customary to shoot arrows into the air on the third day following the birth of a child,”<sup>13</sup> while a bow hanging by a door symbolized the birth of a son in the household, a custom known literally as “hanging bow” (*xuánhú* 弓与瓜).<sup>14</sup> A congratulatory phrase once used to mark a man's birthday was therefore *xuánhú lìngdàn* (悬弧令旦), which can be roughly

translated as “the honorable arrival of a male birth.”

## BROOMS

Because brooms sweep away grime and other evils, they are an integral part of the Chinese New Year season and represent the casting out of both physical and mental cobwebs. Taking the connection of the riddance of evil and ignorance one step further, brooms have come to represent wisdom and learning and thus are the symbol of Shí Dé (拾得), a seventh-century poet, one of the two Tang Dynasty hermits said to have inspired the Hé Hé brothers (see p. [154](#)).

## CHESS

The game of chess (*qí* 棋) is often cited as the pastime of intellectuals and gentlemen in Imperial China, but the game they most commonly played was not chess as it is known in the West today, but the game known in Chinese as *wéiqí* 围棋 (in Japan, it is known as *go*). *Wéiqí* is played with small round black and white markers that are placed on a board of 361 crosses one at a time, where the purpose is to gain territory, whereas Chinese chess is played with sixteen round tokens each with a Chinese character on its face that identifies the military figure it represents, facing one another across a board of sixty-four squares. Paintings of scholars playing board games almost always depict them playing *wéiqí* (see p. [174](#)). *Qí* has a homophone (*qí* 耆 that means “very old.” Interestingly, Confucius regarded the game of *wéiqí* as a complete waste of time.

## CHIMES

Chinese texts dating back to Confucius and Mencius’s times often refer to chimes (*qìng* 磬) and the role they played, together with ancient bells, in Chinese rituals (Figs. [568-569](#)). They used to be made in sets, each a different size, each sounding a different tone when struck by a wooden mallet. It is thus somewhat ironic that although they appear very frequently in modern Chinese decorative art, few casual observers know what they are.



Fig. 568 Stone chimes (*qìng*), sometimes referred to as “musical stones,” are square-angled, boomerang-shaped objects that hung either singly or in rows. Single chimes appear on many Chinese ornaments. Once you recognize their shape you will discover how often they are used to add the sentiment “congratulations” (*qìng*). Drawing courtesy of Sonja Bjaaland.

Chinese chimes resemble Australian boomerangs, but were made of stone or jade rather than wood, which is why they are sometimes referred to as musical stones. Their popularity in contemporary Chinese decorative art, however, has nothing to do with their past importance, but the fact that their name rhymes with another *qìng* that means “to celebrate or congratulate” (*qìng* 庆).

These archaic chimes are thus depicted individually or in pairs, but almost always in combination with other auspicious symbols to augment their meaning. For example, Yetts describes an amulet consisting of two chimes joined by a disk (*bì* 璧) that can be interpreted as “the certain attainment of double good fortune.” The two chimes contribute the meaning “double congratulations” or “double good fortune” while the disk contributes the second pun, as another *bì* (必) means “surely, must, will certainly.”<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 569 A traditional set of stone chimes, photographed in Beijing’s Forbidden City.

We find small chime-shaped designs in textiles, jade chimes tucked into elaborate hair ornaments, and padded chime-shaped silk structures used as the top piece of Chinese New Year mobiles (see Fig. [188](#)). This is one of the most popular combinations – a pair of fish (*yú* 鱼) together with a stone chime (*qìng* 磬) – as this “fish and stone” combination is the visual representation of the expression *jíqìng yòuyú* (吉庆又余), “happiness (*jíqìng* 吉庆) in abundance (*yú* 余).”

## CIRCLES

Small circles, usually three, but sometimes only two, set closely together and connected by straight lines in isolation on Chinese textiles and ceramics represent stars (*xīng* 星) in constellations (Fig. [570](#)).

Circles and round shapes are generally associated with heaven (for example, the Temple of Heaven’s shape is round (see Fig. [520](#)) as opposed to the square shape of the Temple of Earth). One of the world’s leading experts on rank badges believes the reason some birds were contorted into circle shapes on Qing Dynasty rank badges “was a way to more closely associate the mandarins with the emperor by incorporating one element of his taboo symbology, the circle.”<sup>[16](#)</sup>



Fig. 570 Small circles set closely together and connected by straight lines represent the stars in a constellation.

It is not clear where or how the pattern of interlocking circles and hexagons found on textiles or on carved woodwork originated, but there are no extant examples in China prior to the coming of Buddhism in the fourth century, so it may or may not have been a foreign influence. Interlocking circles are “known at a very early date as an illustration to ancient Babylonian mathematical texts” and hexagons were an architectural decorative device dating from Hellenistic times.<sup>[17](#)</sup>

Although scholars are uncertain of their exact origin and usage,

archaeologists have found **circular jade disks** with round holes (*bì* 璧) that date back to the Neolithic Age.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps they were symbolic of the sun or the heavens. They are, however, homophonous with another character that means “surely, must, will certainly” (*bì* 必), which made them ripe for rebus usage. As a result, in addition to any religious or secular role they played in ancient China, they feature in modern decorative pieces to represent the certainty of an event happening. Pens and calligraphy brushes (*shǒubǐ* 手笔), which also share the phoneme *bi*, play the same role (see WRITING INSTRUMENTS p. [264](#)), unless accompanied by paper, ink, and an inkstone, when they are part of the assemblage known as the Four Treasures of the Literary Study (see p. [226](#)).

## CLOUDS

Clouds (*yún* 云) are amongst the oldest decorative motifs in Chinese art; examples can be found dating back to the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-CE 220)<sup>19</sup> (Fig. [573](#)). They represent both the heavens and their linguistic fraternal twin “good fortune” (*yùn* 运) (Fig. [572](#)). Five-colored clouds of red, blue, black, yellow, and white (originally known as *qīngyún* 庆云, but now better known by their literal name of “five-colored clouds” *wǔ sèyún* 五色云), were considered especially auspicious, and signaled a kingdom at peace.<sup>20</sup> This, together with what appears to be an abhorrence of empty space, is the reason why clouds were often used to fill in the empty spaces on imperial robes, although the colors were lightened to more cloud-appropriate pastel shades. See also COLORS p. [218](#) and FIVE p. [226](#).





Fig. 571 The young boy wears a robe decorated with five-colored clouds, considered especially auspicious, as are the waves on the hem of the gown on the right.



Fig. 572 Green bats dart in and out of pink and blue clouds on this piece of folk pottery, signaling good fortune to come.

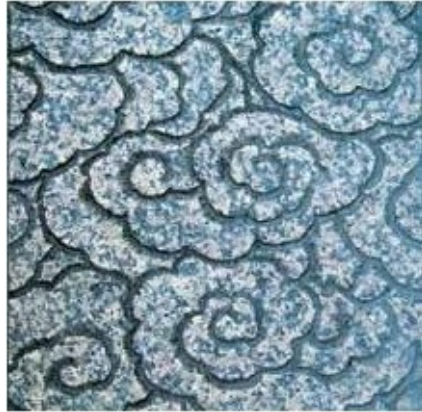


Fig. 573 Stylized clouds, one of the oldest decorations in Chinese art and architecture. Stone carving, Shanghai.

Because *yún* is a homophone for both “clouds” and “good fortune,” bats, which symbolize good luck (see p. [112](#)), are almost always depicted flying in stylized clouds to form the combination “good luck and good fortune” (Fig. [572](#)). If the bats are red, the meaning becomes “vast good luck and good fortune” (see p. [112](#)).

Clouds on Chinese textiles can become quite decorative, sometimes resembling swastikas (see p. [244](#)) or auspicious fungus, the *língzhī* (see p. [50](#)). The knobbed heads of later *rúyì* scepters also resemble stylized fungus-shaped clouds (see SCEPTERS p. [258](#)).

## COINS

Ancient Chinese coins are usually referred to as “cash” and are portrayed as round coins (Fig. [576](#)). Because coins were commonly strung together for safe storage, most old Chinese coins had some sort of hole in the center, making them easily recognizable in Chinese art (Fig. [574](#)). The most frequently depicted coinage is round (round shapes in general are associated with or represent heaven) with a square hole (said for years to represent earth). This type of coin was predated by the round coin with a round hole, and it now seems that it was the manufacturing process that created the square hole, nothing more, so perhaps it is time to put to rest the “round coin representing the heavens with the square hole representing the earth” hypothesis.<sup>[21](#)</sup>

The hole is significant symbolically, however, because it is called an “eye”

(*yǎn* 眼), so when you find a picture or carving of a bat crawling through or emerging from the hole in a Chinese coin, it is a rebus that means “happiness before your eyes,” derived from the *fú* (蝠) for “bat” and the *fú* (福) meaning “good fortune, happiness.” Today, of course, Chinese coins resemble other modern coinage.

Connected coins form a traditional geometric pattern known as *liánqiánwén* (连钱纹), symbolizing wealth (Fig. 29).

As a member of the group known as the Eight Precious Things (*bābǎo* 八宝, see p. 228), coins generally represent wealth. There is one pictorial pun, however, based on a group of three or more of these ancient round coins pierced by an arrow, or three ancient shoe-or dumpling-shaped gold or silver ingots known as *yuánbǎo* (元宝) stacked together on a plate or tray.<sup>22</sup> First you need to know that the Chinese word for “round” is *yuán* (圆) and the word for “first” is also *yuán* (元). Each of three coins or metal ingots is meant to represent one of the three different levels of examinations in Imperial China’s examination system that led to a career in the civil service. A *jiǎo yuán* (角元) was the top scholar of the rural areas, a *huìyuán* (会元) the top scholar in the second set of examinations or the capital examinations, and a *zhuàngyuán* (状元) the top candidate in the third and final round, the imperial examinations presided over by the emperor himself. Hence, the picture of three coins or ingots is a clever way of saying *liánzhòng sānyuán* (连中三元), “May you successively (*lián* 连) hit the mark (*zhòng* 中) and place first (*yuán* 元) in all three (*sān* 三) civil service examinations” or, more colloquially, “passing the examinations three times successively.”



Fig. 574 Two round coins with square holes intersect on this blue-and-white porcelain garden stool.



Fig. 575 A red bat symbolizes “vast happiness” and the two overlapping coins “riches” in this auspicious hanging embroidery. The characters read, counter-clockwise from top left, *jiē xiáng fú zā*, which means “receive auspicious good luck regularly [cyclically].”



Fig. 576 Three Chinese coins. The word meaning “cash” is at the top of the coin with the four characters (*cái*).





Fig. 577 Four old-fashioned Chinese coins (round with square “eyes”) are clearly visible on the rim of this made-in-Macau plate purchased in a street market in Spain. Each coin is bordered by two seal-form *shòu* (“longevity”) characters. The central design consists of a bird in a pine tree gazing down at some sort of animal. Peaches sit nestled in the greenery completing this overall auspicious pattern with its wishes for “long life.”



Fig. 578 These modern stone sculptures are made in the form of ancient pieces of money known as ingots. They make a frequent appearance in Chinese New Year scrolls, paintings of the God of Wealth, and other auspicious designs.





Fig. 579 A stack of three gold ingots held by a God of Wealth illustrate the rebus *liánzhòng sānyuán* discussed on p. [250](#).

The most common coinage was copper and a pair of copper coins symbolizes wealth to this day in China (Fig. [576](#)). A pair of coins, recognizable by the hole in the middle, is still one of the most popular symbols found on Chinese New Year decorations and greeting cards. A decorative painting or sign bearing a pair of coins is sometimes still seen hanging above shop doors to bring prosperity to the shop owner. (See the two small metal “coin” beads in the 108-bead mandarin necklace shown in Fig. [596](#).) The power of their portrayal was considered so great in the last century that coins were hung around children’s necks, frequently in clusters of eight or ten, on red strings to bring good luck (see also PADLOCKS p. [257](#)). Coins strung together by red string to form a short sword ending in a tassel were once a popular talisman. They can be spotted in an occasional painting and are still found in coin shops. Old coins from the Tang (618–906) and Song (960–1279) Dynasties were considered especially lucky.

Sometimes you can see impressions made from coins in clay tomb tiles or you will find imitation clay coins in a museum exhibition. We know that Han tombs often contained real or imitation coins, presumably to help the deceased pay their taxes and other costs in the afterlife.<sup>[23](#)</sup>

Another form of money resembling Chinese dumplings, actually ingots (*dìng* 錠) of silver and gold, make a frequent appearance in New Year scrolls and paintings of the God of Wealth and his companions (see *Cái Shén* p. [161](#)) (Figs. [578](#), [579](#)). These are the ingots also known as *yuánbǎo* (元宝), discussed earlier, on p. [250](#). For their meaning when grouped with a brush and *rúyì* scepter, see WRITING INSTRUMENTS p. [264](#).

## CONCH SHELLS

A conch shell is one of the symbols of Buddhism (see p. [242](#)), but is also an Indian and Himalayan symbol of position, power, and royalty.

## FANS

Fans have been popular accessories throughout Chinese history. Although the oldest fans in China are believed to have been made of large leaves, perhaps palm fronds, used to shield people from sun and rain, other early fans were made of feathers. Hence, the generic word for “fan” in Chinese today (*shàn* 扇) is composed of those two elements, one meaning “feathers” (习习) and the other a “cover” or “half a door” (户), derived from “door” (門). The feathers from eagles, magpies, cranes, kingfishers, and peacocks all once served as material for feather fans.

The simple bamboo fan and the cattail leaf fan were invented during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–CE 220), to be followed by the fan-shaped duster made of long animal hair, such as from the tails of deer, horses, or yaks, introduced around 265 CE (see Fig. [560](#)). This type of fan was traditionally used by men of distinction as a status symbol, as well as by Daoist sages and the Immortals. A fan tied by ribbons to seven other objects is part of a collection of items identified with the Eight Immortals and represents the group (see EIGHT DAOIST SYMBOLS p. [240](#)).

The silk moon-shaped fan appeared during the Liu Song Dynasty (420–79) and was particularly fashionable amongst court ladies. By the Tang Dynasty (618–907) fans became popular as a medium for painted designs (Fig. [580](#)), and by the Song (960–1279) painted circular fans became so treasured for the art they carried, it is said that the ink was barely dry before many were separated from their frames to be mounted as album leaves. It was through their association with status and their use as a medium for calligraphy and art that fans came to symbolize the perfect Confucian “gentleman.” They were a wonderful medium for artists and poets as each season dictated different themes (with varying motifs for men and women), creating a huge demand. It is not known when folding fans came to China from Japan, where they were said to have been inspired by bat’s wings, but there is a lacquer item from a grave on display in the Changzhou Museum that depicts a woman holding a folding fan, that has caused historians to believe that they were common in China from the time of the Southern Song (1127–79).<sup>[24](#)</sup>

There are three basic types of fans: (1) ceremonial fans (*tuánshàn* 团扇), (2) rigid fans (*biànmàn* 便面, which means literally “convenient [for covering the] face”), and (3) folding fans (*zhéshàn* 折扇 or *zhǐ shàn* 纸扇).<sup>25</sup> High-status individuals used round or folding fans, while commoners used paper or cattail leaf fans,<sup>26</sup> so the careful examination of the fans being held by the people in a Chinese painting will reveal their social status and the season and give hints about the age of the painting. As fans were discarded in the autumn, a deserted wife was once referred to as “an autumn fan.”

Finally, “fan” (*shàn* 扇) has a homophone (*shàn* 善) that means “good, kind, friendly, and perfect,” so a *shànrén* (善人, a “*shàn* person”) is the Chinese expression for “philanthropist.” The Chinese intelligentsia, for whom fans were a natural accessory, would have enjoyed this play on words. There even exists a nineteenth-century crystal snuff bottle that depicts a fan together with five bats. The meaning is clear – act charitably and you will be rewarded with the Five Happinesses.<sup>27</sup> See BAT p. [112](#).

## FLAMES

Mythical animals usually have flames surrounding or emanating from their legs to emphasize their powerful and supernatural nature (Fig. [581](#)); see the flames surrounding the *qílín* in Fig. [319](#). Flames can sometimes be found in the vicinity of other important beasts, for example, lions and tigers, but usually do not touch their actual bodies. Important objects such as the “Precious Jewels” and Buddhist symbols like the sword of knowledge held by the Bodhisattva Manjusri (p. [188](#)), are also embellished with flames to underscore their special powers. See all the flames on the emperor’s robe, pp. [232–3](#).



Fig. 580 A Tang Dynasty fresco depicting a maid holding a round moon-shaped silk fan. From the tomb of the Princess Yǒngtài (永泰), who was beaten to death at the age of seventeen together with her older brother, Prince Yǐ Dé (懿德), in 701.



Fig. 581 These mythical animals are surrounded in a sea of flames emphasizing their powerful and supernatural nature. They may be the mythic *xièzhì* as they have a dragon-like head, lion's body, bear's tail, mane, a single horn, and paws (not hooves); on the other hand, they may not!



Fig. 582 The object in the vase with the two lotuses is a long-handled axe known as a halberd (*jǐ*). Because it shares a homophone with a number of other auspicious meanings, it makes a frequent appearance in such pictures as this collection of 100 Antiques. Drawing courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.

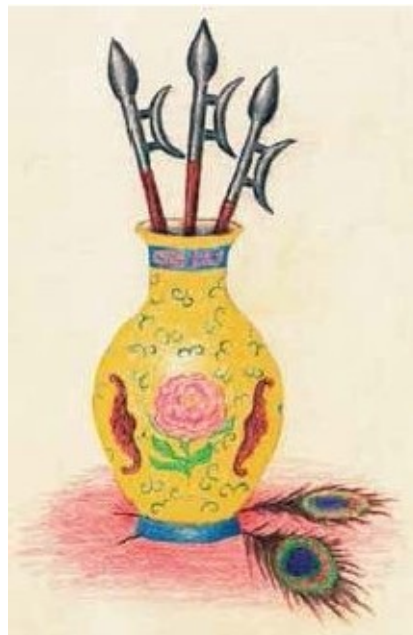


Fig. 583 Three halberds in a vase is a well-known motif expressing the desire for “three official promotions.” In this design, the halberds are a pun on the word that means “steps” or “grades” (*jí*). Drawing courtesy of Sonja Bjaaland.

## HALBERDS

The long-handled axe or pole axe known as a halberd (*jǐ* 戟), sometimes translated as a spear, but in reality a cross between an axe and a spear as it has a



long handle, shares a homophone with a number of auspicious meanings, including the *jí* (吉) that means “good fortune, lucky, auspicious” and another *jí* (级) that means “steps,” as in grades (Fig. 582). A halberd and a stone chime (*qìng* 磬, thanks to its homophone *qìng* 庆, which means “to congratulate”) therefore means “good luck and good fortune.” Add a *rúyì* scepter and the combination can be interpreted as “May your luck and fortune be as you desire” or “May you have as much luck as you desire.”<sup>28</sup> When this motif appeared on imperial robes, Cammann noted that “sometimes the scepter merely juts from the waves nearby, but more often it appears in actual conjunction with the other two; crossed with the halberd behind the jade stone, for example.”<sup>29</sup>

There are many depictions of vases holding three halberds, including a very famous one in the Butler Family Collection in England. It clearly depicts a well-wisher holding a vase with three halberds, representing the wish for three official promotions (Fig. 583).<sup>30</sup> Here the halberds (*jǐ* 戟) represent the *jí* (级) that means “steps,” as in grades. The vase (*píng* 井瓦) represents the *píng* in the expression *píngdì yī shēng léi* (平地一声雷), “an unexpected happy event.” Thus, a vase giving rise (*shēng* 生) to three (*sān* 三) halberds (*jǐ* 戟) or *píng shēng sān jǐ* (井瓦生三戟) can be translated as “[Hope you have the happy event of being] promoted (*shēng* 升) three (*sān* 三) advancements (*jí* 级) in rapid succession.” *Píng* might also be used to suggest *píngbù qīngyún* (平步青云), “to have a meteoric rise.”

This design appears on textiles as well as ceramics.<sup>31</sup> The Art Institute of Chicago has in its collection a man’s semiformal court robe known as a *jífú* (吉月艮) in dark blue gauze that bears a vase containing three halberds among the billows of the “standing water” (*lìshuǐ* 立水), the wavy or straight lines representing the ocean, topped by foam, used as the hem border.<sup>33</sup> A *shēng* (笙, reed pipe) stands close by to ensure that viewers do not miss the meaning. A variation of this motif has been identified on some late Qing robes.<sup>34</sup> In this instance, a jade musical chime (*qìng* 磬) is superimposed against the shaft of the halberds to produce the combination of halberd, musical chime, and vase (*jǐ qìng hé píng* 戟磬合瓶), where *hé* (和) means “join, combine, union.” When substituting their homophones, we arrive at the auspicious hope for “good luck, good fortune, and peace” (*jíqìng hépíng* 吉庆和平).

## HATS AND OFFICIAL HEADDRESSES

An examination of the hats and official headdresses (*guān* 冠) worn by men in court paintings reveals both rank and season of the year. Each official rank had a specific ornament on the top of his court hat for instant status recognition (see p. [220](#) for the types of finials and buttons used to designate officials' ranks). The season can be determined by the shape of the hat: conical hats made of lightweight material with or without tassels were worn in the summer (Fig. [584](#)), while heavier fabric black hats with upturned brims, sometimes with fur trim, were worn in the winter. The dates on which the hats were changed were strictly set by the Ministry of Rites – around the twentieth day of the third month for changing into warm weather hats and the eighth month for changing into cold weather hats. Similarly, women changed from gold to jade hairpins and vice-versa on the same dates, wearing jade in the summer and gold in the winter.



Fig. 584 A fifth-rank official's summer bamboo hat identifiable by the simulated rock crystal jewel on top. These hats all have a looped cord at the top which you can just see in this picture which was the hat's carrying handle. The hat itself is made of finely split bamboo and covered in silk. Inside, a circular band positions the hat on the head. Summer hats were replaced with winter hats on annually established dates. Courtesy of Ken Rutherford.

In general, hats represent official status even when they do not appear on a man's head. For example, a popular still life used as a textile design in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) depicted a boat (*chuán* 舟) bearing a hat (*guān* 冠), jade belt (*dài* 榴), and pomegranate (*liú* 冠帶船榴). Decoded, *guān dài chuán liú* (冠帶船榴)

infers *chuándài guānliū* (传代官溜), “the smooth (*liū* 溜) handing down (*chuán* 传) of official positions (*guān* 官) through the generations (*dài* 代).” Eggplants were also said to resemble hats and therefore sometimes symbolize officialdom.

See also ROOSTER p. [85](#) for a discussion of how roosters’ combs were used to symbolize officials’ hats and a career in China’s civil service.

## INGOTS

See COINS p. [250](#).

## KITES

Scenes of the 100 Children often include kite flying, so it is interesting to try and understand how and why kite flying was so widespread in China. Two popular stories are given credit, both purportedly dating from the Han Dynasty. One tells the story of how whistles were tied to kites by an out-manned garrison to scare away the enemy. The other tells of how a brave officer tied himself to a kite to scare an opposing army into retreating. One of the most popular kite designs today is that of a man with outstretched wings, the brave officer perhaps?

“The earliest written attribution for the invention of the kite [is in the] Former Sun period (A.D. 420–79). In a book called *Shih Wu Chi Yuan* it is noted that in 200 B.C. Han Hsin, a famous statesman, adviser, and general to the first emperor of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 7), invented the kite.”<sup>34</sup> Whatever their origin, kite flying became an acknowledged activity, especially in the autumn at the time of the Double Nine festival (pp. [230–1](#)) celebrated on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month, a day also associated with walking in the hills and drinking chrysanthemum wine.

## KNOTS

Knots (*jié* 结) were originally used to join separate cords or ropes, and were so ubiquitous in Chinese life that Chinese men used to carry a special tool tied to their waist sashes to loosen knots (Figs. [585-588](#), [590](#)). Eventually, knots came to decorate a vast array of objects in everyday life, ranging from wind chimes and lanterns to tobacco pouches and hair ornaments.<sup>35</sup> The vast majority of knots are “fashioned after symbols of longevity, happiness, Buddhist treasures, prosperity,

and the commonality of all being ... and were a form of communication whereby people could express blessings, best wishes, and amorous sentiments.”<sup>36</sup> A knot is therefore not a symbol in itself, but what it represents, often a Chinese character such as *shòu* (寿), “longevity” or *shuāngxǐ* (囍), “double happiness.” Some knots have very complicated connotations, such as the knot called *bājí* (八吉) or Eight Treasures.



Fig. 585 A rich array of Chinese New Year decorations with an endless knot in the center. Courtesy of Sha Ying.



Fig. 586 A ram's head knot.



Fig. 587 Endless knots form the corner designs of this Chinese rug from Yunnan. The ribbons streaming from it enhance its auspiciousness.

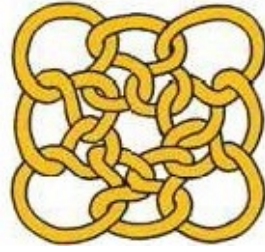


Fig. 588 A copper coin knot.



Fig. 589 Two birds soar into the air towards the moon (note the hare grinding the elixir of immortality under the tree), each carrying a knotted ribbon in its mouth in the combination known as *shòu niǎo xián jié*. Detail from a bronze mirror.

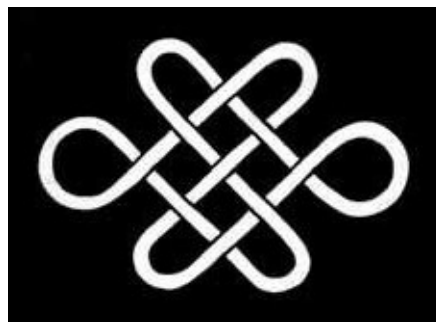


Fig. 590 An endless knot.

There are several auspicious homophones for “knot,” including one meaning “festival” (*jié* 节) and another “outstanding person, hero” (*jié* 杰); the presence of a knot in a picture therefore always signals a rebus (Fig. 589). A bird holding a ribbon with a knot in its mouth, a combination known as *shòu niǎo xián jié* (受鸟衔结), is a general “well-wishing phrase.”<sup>37</sup> The components consist of *shòu* (受) “to receive,” *xián* (衔) “to hold in the mouth” as well as “title or rank,” *niǎo* (鸟)



“bird,” and *jié* (结) “knot.” So the bird holding a knot in its mouth is also the bird bearing title and rank to an outstanding person. Remember also that *shòu* is a homophone for “longevity” (寿) and *shòu* and *niǎo* are two components of the name of the bird known as the Asian Paradise Flycatcher (*shòudàiniǎo* 绶带鸟). Remove the *niǎo* and you are left with *shòudài* (绶带), which is a “ribbon attached to an official seal or medal.” To complete the rebus, *dài* (带) means both “ribbon” as well as “to bear or have.” See also RIBBONS p. [258](#).

A knot can be combined with other objects, such as a fish, an ancient stone or jade chime, or two overlapping antique Chinese coins, to denote prosperity.

There are many decorative pieces that incorporate knots, chimes, fish, and other auspicious symbols that are known collectively as a “surplus of auspiciousness” (*jíqìng yǒu yú* 吉庆有余).

## MIRRORS

“A Mirror in China is no mere sheet of glass, backed with mercury and designed to reflect the perfect features of a lovely woman.... A mirror has more serious work to do.”<sup>38</sup> Originally made of polished bronze with a tin alloy<sup>39</sup> (Fig. [589](#)), usually but not necessarily round,<sup>40</sup> mirrors (*jìng* 镜) were understood in pre-modern China “to represent the cosmos”<sup>41</sup> and to have special powers, including the ability to cure disease. An ancient Chinese text notes: “Therefore the brilliance of the mirrors represented the light of sun and moon combined; and they communicated the intention of the powers in earth beneath, and the spirits in heaven above.”<sup>42</sup> In the past, many were decorated with the animals that represented the four directions (see FOUR p. [226](#)) as well as other religious symbols.



Fig. 591 Sitting on top of a tiger, a fierce warrior protects the owner of this mirror surrounded by the eight trigrams, known as a *bāguà*.

The Chinese have long believed that mirrors also deflect evil (Fig. [591](#)). Mirrors have been found in countless Chinese tombs and are still sold throughout the Chinese world, often surrounded by the eight trigrams of Chinese cosmology, to protect oneself and one's family. At least one mirror dating back to the Tang Dynasty (618–906) has an inscription directly linking it to the fifth day of the fifth month, the most dangerous day of the year in the Chinese calendar,<sup>[43](#)</sup> a date when a good mirror would have been invaluable.

Mirrors also represent conjugal fidelity and unbroken happiness, the rationale being that if a man and wife were separated and prior to that broke a mirror, each taking half, and the wife was unfaithful to her husband during his absence, her half would turn into a magpie and return to him (see [MAGPIE](#) p. [77](#)). There is no mention of the possibility of the reverse happening, however.

For the combination of a mirror with a vase or pair of vases, see [VASES](#) p. [263](#).

## MONEY

The Cantonese “use the word ‘water’ (in slang) as synonymous with money,”<sup>44</sup> which probably explains the popularity of pictures of pools of fish in Guangzhou and Hong Kong, where there are Cantonese populations. The conviction that water is the source of wealth is an old Lamaist belief, which is probably why all those “precious” objects are peeking out of the waves at the bottom of imperial robes,<sup>45</sup> and why Liú Hǎi’s name incorporates the word for ocean (*hǎi* 海). See also COINS p. [250](#).

## MOON

According to the Chinese, the moon (*yuè* 月) is *yīn*, while the sun is *yáng* (see *yīn* AND *YÁNG* p. [239](#)) (Figs. [592-594](#)). Hence, the two are appropriately mated, and while women worship the moon, men worship the sun. A book recording festival observances around 1900 records the Beijing proverb, “Men do not bow to the moon. Women do not sacrifice to the God of the Kitchen” (*Nán bù bài yuè, nǚ bù jì zào* 男不拜月，女不祭灶).<sup>46</sup> The two symbols of sun and moon are ancient symbols in China, which according to at least one early text,<sup>47</sup> were worshipped from the Zhou Dynasty (1027–256 BCE). They often decorate paired objects.



Fig. 592 The animal most closely identified with the moon in Chinese lore is the hare, believed to dwell on the moon, using a mortar and pestle to grind an elixir of immortality. Drawing courtesy of Sonja Bjaaland.



Fig. 593 A hare is depicted against the background of a full moon. Detail from a stone mural in the Beijing Hotel, Beijing.



Fig. 594 A hare and moon. One of the twelve zodiac disks on the observation deck surrounding the Fountain of Fortune in Singapore's Suntec City. Artist Han Sai Por.

The Goddess of the Moon, Cháng'é (嫦娥) (p. [206](#)), is often depicted seated at a dressing table looking into a mirror held by a servant girl. The scene may include the hare which lives in the moon, who uses a mortar and jade pestle to create an elixir of immortality. The three-legged toad associated with the moon may also be part of the scene, although some legends say that it is Cháng'é herself who is the toad that swallows the moon on occasion to cause eclipses. Cháng'é was married to the Archer, Hòu Yì (see p. [164](#)), who resides on the sun while Cháng'é resides alone in her palace on the moon.

The Moon or Mid-Autumn Festival (Zhōngqiūjié 中秋节) takes place on the fifteenth day of the eighth month of the Chinese lunar calendar and is still celebrated throughout the Chinese world, mainly by the making, giving, and eating of “moon cakes,” round cakes often decorated with embossed patterns of the moon or hares. In olden times, moon cakes were eaten and given as presents, but offerings to the moon were also made, typically moon cakes, melons, and other round fruits – and for the hare, yellow beans.

The moon in a painting or picture is a useful identifier of the season –

autumn – dictated by the fourth-century artist Gù Kǎizhī (known in Wade-Giles as Ku K'aichih, 顾恺之), who once declared: “In the spring the lakes are full of water, in summer clouds gather round the mountain tops, in autumn the moon shines in all her splendour, in winter the snow displays its beauty on the mountains.” As a result, “if the moon is in a picture, it must be autumn; there probably is not a single picture with a spring or summer moon in it.”<sup>48</sup>

## MOUNTAINS

A mountain peak or series of peaks is a common symbol on Imperial Chinese robes, carpets, and other textiles (see Fig. [505](#)). Arising from the Ocean (*hǎi* 海) of Eternity (*shòuhǎi* 寿海), the mythological sacred range known as Kūnlún (昆仑) was considered the origin of all things on earth as well as the spiritual home of the Daoist goddess, the Queen Mother of the West (Xī Wángmǔ 西王母) (p. [203](#)). It was believed to be in northwest China.

“Mountains played the same sort of role in Chinese cosmology as the Emperor did in society: they ensured cosmic order and permanence.”<sup>49</sup> They were considered especially auspicious when combined with water, as on the hem of imperial robes, represented by the deep border of wavy or straight colored lines known as “standing water” (*lìshuǐ* 立水), representing the ocean.<sup>50</sup> When this design of mountains and oceans (*shānhǎi* 山海) is found on imperial robes and other insignia, it is sometimes referred to as the auspicious blessing of *shòu shān fú hǎi* (寿山福海), “longevity and good fortune as unlimited as that of the oceans and mountains.” The mountain(s) depicted generally have three peaks, indicating the Three Isles of the Immortals (p. [176](#)). See also FIVE SACRED MOUNTAINS OF DAOISM p. [240](#) and FOUR SACRED MOUNTAINS OF BUDDHISM p. [244](#).

## MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Music played a major role in rituals in ancient China, including those of ancestor worship. A major archaeological discovery in 1977 revealed a tomb dating back to approximately 433 BCE (dated from an inscription found on a bell), unearthed during the construction of a factory in Hubei, China. It held 124 musical instruments, including a set of sixty-four bells, and was the burial site of the



Marquis Yi of Zeng. The large number of female attendants found buried in a separate chamber from the Marquis's other family members has led to the belief that they may have been musicians in his orchestra. The importance of music in rituals continued right up into the Qing Dynasty in China, contributing a sense of continuity with the ancient past and authenticity of rule. "Proper performance of music on instruments sanctioned by the authority of ancient tradition helped establish the legitimacy of the Manchu rule.... Qianlong is recorded as saying, 'Beating time to the music, we ponder (ritual), Heaven's blessings, and our ancestors' virtue.'"<sup>51</sup> See also BELLS p. [247](#) and CHIMES p. [248](#).

Musical instruments are used to convey a number of sentiments but when depicted as decorations are usually linked to the pursuits of a learned person or gentleman. As one of the Four Arts of the Scholar (p. [174](#)), the *qín* (琴), a seven-stringed instrument resembling a zither, symbolizes one of the leisurely pursuits a scholar could or should enjoy.

Musical instruments can also symbolize matrimonial harmony. If, for example, you encounter a picture of the seven-string *qín* (琴) together with a five-or ten-stringed instrument (later it had twenty-five strings) also resembling a zither, known as a *sè* (瑟), they symbolize the mutual affection between husband and wife. If there are other symbols of marital harmony, such as lotuses, in the picture, you have thematic symbol consistency, and you will know that you have interpreted the meaning correctly.

Another common Chinese instrument is the pear-shaped four-stringed lute known as the *pípa* (琵琶).

A picture of eight ancient instruments, where each instrument represents the substance from which it was made, depicts the grouping known as *bāyīn* (八音). Usually joined by ribbons or positioned in clouds, they comprise the following classical instruments: a bell (*zhōng* 钟) representing metal; a stone or jade chime (*qìng* 磬); an egg-shaped holed wind instrument (*xūn* 埙) representing earth; the *qín* (琴) described above, representing silk; an ancient percussion instrument (*zhù* 祝) representing wood; a drum (*gǔ* 鼓) representing leather; the reed pipe known as a *shēng* (笙) (see below), representing a gourd; and a flute (*guǎn* 管) representing bamboo.

One of the Eight Immortals, Hǎn Xiāngzi (p. [179](#)), is usually depicted holding a flute (but in what may be artistic confusion, occasionally the hermaphrodite Lán Cǎihé 蓝采和 (p. [180](#)) does too, although [s]he more typically

carries a basket of flowers). An ancient bamboo percussion instrument known as the *yúgǔ* (鱼鼓) identifies Zhāng Guǒlǎo (张果老) (p. 179), another of the Eight Immortals and patron of artists and calligraphers, who also is commonly depicted riding a white donkey. An eight-sided drum – the Drum of Great Peace (*tàipínggǔ* 太平鼓) – has been used as a belt toggle motif and most likely represents peace and harmony (*tàipíng* 太平).

A reed mouth organ, pipes, or har-monica, known as a *shēng* (笙), serves as a homophone for the concepts of “success or professional promotion” (*shēng* 升) and “giving birth” (*shēng* 生) (Fig. 595). Cammann describes seeing a Chinese belt toggle in the shape of a set of reed pipes that he believes would have been the property of a nobleman. In the pictures known as “100 Boys” (see LARGE NUMBERS p. 231) you will often find a small procession of three or four lads following one boy carrying and playing a *shēng*.

Mouth organs (*shēng*) are often combined with lotus (*lián* 莲) and sometimes cassia/cinnamon (*guì* 桂), which adds the meaning of “precious” or “noble,” and carried by a child (*guìzǐ* 贵子 or “precious child” in the vernacular)<sup>52</sup> to form the rebus *liánshēng guìzǐ* (连生贵子), “the continual birth of successful children.” This was a very popular motif in the late Ming and Qing that can still be found on Chinese New Year decorations.<sup>53</sup> A beautiful example of this design is found on a bride’s satin bed covering from the nineteenth century that depicts a scholar (discernible by his clothing and headdress), embroidered in gold and silk, riding a lion.<sup>54</sup> He holds an official’s cap, pipes, and a lotus flower, symbolizing the wishful result of all marriages – that the bride should “continuously give birth to sons who will be continuously promoted.”<sup>55</sup> It is reported that the women of Suzhou used to wear small silver and gold charms and pendants of small boys holding a lotus and small mouth organs to ensure the “repeated [*lián*] birth [*shēng*]” of sons.<sup>56</sup>



Fig. 595 A man plays a reed mouth organ in this detail from a stone wall mural, Beijing Hotel, Beijing.

A pair of hairpins in the Palace Museum collection in Beijing depicts pipes together with an official's cap that is known as the "promotion hair ornament."<sup>57</sup>

## NECKLACES

The 108-bead "mandarin necklace" worn by all members of the court in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) had its origin in a 108-bead Buddhist rosary sent as a gift to a Manchu emperor by the Dalai Lama of Tibet (Figs. [596](#), [597](#)). The Manchus added the three small strings that hang to the sides, two on one side, the third on the other depending on the sex of the wearer (men wore the two-stringed side over their heart, women the reverse), and the drop extension that served as a counterweight down the back. These necklaces were worn by fifth rank and above civil officials and fourth rank and above military officials and their wives, although exceptions were known, and were made of ivory, jade, coral, amber, and other precious and symbolic materials. Only the emperor and empress were permitted pearls. Each bead represents one of the 108 "earthly worries" in traditional Buddhist thought, although the number predates Buddhism; 108, in fact, was the number of traditional names of a Hindu deity where the number "nine" also held special significance. The beads were separated into batches of twenty-seven, each batch separated by a single larger bead. For the significance of twenty-seven (three times nine), see [THREE](#) p. [225](#).

## PADLOCKS

In Chinese paintings, padlocks are sometimes seen around children's necks, their purpose being to chain the wearer to human existence. Silver padlocks can still be found in Chinese antique shops as they were used prodigiously in the nineteenth century and are still sometimes seen on rural children, albeit in more subtle sizes. While most padlocks were made of metal, some were fashioned from peach kernels (see PEACH p. 55) to reinforce the wearer's chances of longevity, or survival itself. Many of these padlocks are beautifully decorated with scenes from mythology, auspicious sayings, etc.<sup>58</sup>

## PAGODAS AND PAVILIONS

What Chinese landscape painting would be complete without a pagoda or pavilion? Pagodas are Buddhist in origin, built to protect their environs and/or commemorate an auspicious event. Their architecture is intended to lead the eye upward. The curved roof of a Chinese pavilion painted on the bottom of a scroll fulfills the same function, leading the eye gracefully upward.





Fig. 596, 597 The 108-bead “mandarin necklace” was worn by all members of the Qing court, and had its origin in a 108-bead Buddhist “rosary” sent as a gift by the Dalai Lama. The Manchus added the three small additional strings that hang to the side and the drop extension that serves as a counterweight down the back.

The Chinese word for a pavilion (*tíng* 亭) when placed high up (*shàng* 上, meaning “upward, high, on”) among clouds (*tíngshàng* (亭上) was a rebus for the highest status in the Imperial Examinations since this was also referred to as *tīngshang* (廳上),<sup>59</sup> hence the profusion of pavilions floating in clouds on Chinese snuff bottles and other literati treasures.

## PEACOCK FEATHERS

See PEACOCK p. [78](#).





Fig. 598 This drawing of a vase (*pīng*) wrapped with a ribbon (*dài*) expresses the hope for longevity, peace, and official honors through the generations. Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.



Fig. 599 Ribbons twirl around this victory banner to embellish its auspiciousness. The flowers depicted are chrysanthemums, associated with the autumn.



Fig. 600 Depictions of the Eight Buddhist Symbols or Eight Taoist Symbols associated with the Eight Immortals are almost invariably tied with ribbons to disclose their miraculous properties.



Fig. 601 Bats (which symbolize “good fortune”) carry peaches (which represent longevity, *shòu*) in their mouth (*xián*) with knotted ribbons (*jié*), which carries the special meaning of “rank linked with honors throughout a long life.” Detail from the Forbidden City, Beijing.

## RIBBONS AND SASHES

Whether floating in space behind flying *apsara* or precious objects, or being carried in the mouths of birds, or wrapped around objects, ribbons and sashes are immediate clues to an auspicious message (Figs. [603](#), [604](#)). They are so often depicted they tend to be overlooked, yet they play an important role in emphasizing the auspicious and miraculous properties of the objects they surround or embellish. The Eight Buddhist Symbols, the Eight Taoist Symbols, stone chimes, swastikas, and other good luck objects found throughout Chinese art are often embellished with ribbons. Ribbons also accentuate the special powers or divine nature of immortals, gods and goddesses, *apsara*, and other ethereal creatures.

In addition, a ribbon *dài* (帶) has two phonetic twins: “to bear, have, bring along” (*dài* 帶) and “generations” (*dài* 代). Hence, a ribbon wrapped around an object, or linking two objects, or connecting separate objects usually adds the felicitous wish for successive generations to follow. The red ribbon that ties a bride and groom together during a wedding ceremony is making such a request; the newlewed are tied to one another in order to bear successive generations (Fig. [601](#)). A very common design shows a bat (“good fortune”) carrying a swastika (“10,000”) in its mouth, trailing ribbons, which should be translated as the “infinite [blessings] of fortune, longevity, and promotions” (see SWASTIKA, p. [244](#)).

Similarly, a silk ribbon attached to an official seal or medal, known as *shòu* (綬), which therefore indicates the awarding of official honors, is a homophone for the well-known term for “longevity” (*shòu* 寿) (Fig. [598](#)). Thus, a silk sash wrapped around a vase (whose homophone means “peace”, see p. [263](#)) is communicating the message of longevity, peace, and official honors.

For the meaning of the picture of a bird holding a knotted ribbon in its mouth, a combination known as *shòu niǎo xián jié* (受鸟衔结), see FIG. 589 and p. [255](#).

## SADDLES

Horse saddles (*ān* 鞍) symbolize peace and tranquility (*ān* 安) (Fig. [602](#)). As noted in the Introduction (p. [12](#)), miniature brass or copper (*tóng* 铜) saddles used to be

worn as belt toggles and charms to express the marital wish for “peace together” (*tóngān* 同安). Saddles in still lifes should always be understood to be part of a rebus. For example, a saddle (*ān* 鞍), scepter (*rúyì* 如意), and jar (*píng* 井瓦) suggest *píngān rúyì* 平安如意, “[May your life be as] peaceful (*píngān* 平安) as you desire (*rúyì* 如意).”



Fig. 602 A wooden saddle (*ān*), which is a pun that can also mean “peace.”

## SCALES

Scales or an old-fashioned merchant’s balance symbolize business success.

## SCEPTERS

Most commonly made of jade but also of amber, rock crystal, stone, gold, silver, bone, bamboo, and other substances, scepters denote rank and accomplishment, and hence power, in Chinese art but their origin and former use is much debated by scholars (Figs. [603-607](#); see also Fig. [81](#)).<sup>60</sup> The scepters found in Chinese art are commonly understood to be *rúyì* (如意) or “wish-granting scepters” because, over time, the head of the *rúyì* came to resemble the *língzhī* fungus; *rúyì* literally translates as “as you wish” or, more colloquially, “May all your wishes come true,” since *rú* (如) means “according to” and *yì* (意) means “wishes, or desires.” The scepter and the fungus thus share a symbolic meaning in Chinese art, one inferring the other. Both are recognizable in the special “longevity clouds” found on Chinese textiles, ceramics, etc. where they combine to mean “longevity as desired.”



Fig. 603 Detail of a *rúyì* scepter cradled in the right arm of the God of Literature, which together with his traditional official's attire conveys the message of rank and accomplishments. © Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore. Gift of Frank and Pamela Hickley.



Fig. 604 A small embroidered bag in the shape of a *rúyì* with the motif of the citron known as Buddha's Hand.



Fig. 605 A row of *rúyì* heads form an architectural feature along this Beijing roof.



Fig. 606 Detail from the base of a statue in Beijing's Forbidden City showing *rúyì* clouds.



Fig. 607 A modern carved wood *rúyì* scepter, which at one time would have denoted rank and accomplishment.

The *rúyì* scepter is also associated with Daoism because of the resemblance of the scepter head to the fungus of immortality and explains why it is sometimes held by one of the Eight Immortals, Cáo Guójiù (曹国舅) (p. [180](#)) as well as other deities and immortals.

During the Qing Dynasty (1644– 1911), *rúyì* scepters were commonly presented to the emperor and empress on auspicious occasions, and by studying the decorations on a scepter, it is easy to guess the occasion, be it a birthday, wedding, reign anniversary, etc.

A *rúyì* scepter combined with lotus (*lián* 莲) carries the wish that “your desires will come true year after year” (*lián* 连), see LOTUS p. [27](#). When it is combined with a goldfish (*jīnyú*), the meaning is “May you have as much surplus wealth as you desire” (*jīnyú rúyì*) since “goldfish” is composed of the rebus *jīn*, “gold”, and *yú*, “surplus.” See FISH p. [96](#).

See HALBERDS p. [253](#) for the symbolism of a scepter, halberd, and jade musical chime.

A *rúyì* scepter, calligraphy brush, and silver ingot form the combination “everything will surely be as you desire” as the *bǐ* of “brush” (笔) is a homophone for the *bì* for “surely” (必), while the silver (*yín* 银) ingot representing both riches



and wealth is a homophone for the *yīn* (殷) that means “abundant, great, many.” See WRITING INSTRUMENTS p. [264](#).

## SHOES

Shoes (*xié* 鞋), sometimes depicted in Chinese art but more often taking the form of a belt toggle or amulet, have a number of symbolisms, most utilizing the homophones *xié* (谐), “in harmony,” or *xié* (偕), “together with, in the company of” (Fig. [608](#)). A pair of shoes or “shoe and shoe” (*xié hé xié* 鞋和鞋) thus symbolizes a couple harmoniously growing old together (*xiéhéxié* 谐和偕 or 偕和谐), *xié* (偕) meaning “together with” and both *héxié* (和谐) and *xiéhé* meaning (谐和) “in harmony.” This expression would not be foreign to most of us, as the expression, “they’re as comfortable as an old pair of shoes” is fairly well known.

If the shoe is of brass, literally a “brass shoe” (*tóng xié* 铜鞋), the message is “harmony together” (*tóngxié* 同偕), just as a miniature brass saddle (*tóng ān* 铜鞍) is used to represent “peace together” (*tóngān* 同安). Small brass and porcelain/carved wood pairs of shoes are still made and sold as decorative containers, ornaments, and good luck charms.

In central and southern China, Cammann reports that a different pronunciation of shoes (*haizi*) makes them a symbol of having offspring, which has produced many belt toggles in the form of a miniature shoe inside another miniature shoe.<sup>61</sup> This renders the rebus *xiǎo háizi yú xiǎo háizi*, “little shoe has little shoe” or “May your children have children.” Miniatures of the shoes worn by women with bound feet (“lotus feet”) added the homophone of “lotus” (*lián*) and its alternative meaning of “successive.” For a further variation, see CRAB p. [94](#).



Fig. 608 A pair of shoes (shoe and shoe, *xié hé xié*) symbolizes a couple harmoniously growing old

together.



Fig. 609 An archaistic inlaid bronze vessel, late Ming Dynasty, featuring six small whirling-cloud motifs at the neck. Also note the bovine heads, pair of confronting stylized dragons facing a zoomorphic mask at the shoulder, and *taotie* mask loop handles suspending loose rings. Courtesy of Sotheby's.



Fig. 610 An ancient roof tile with a sun pattern found in the environs of the Tang tombs west of the ancient capital city of Changan (modern Xian).



Fig. 611 Detail of Fig. [230](#), an insignia badge for the wife of a fifth-rank military official showing a sun and swirling clouds. There is some debate over whether wives of military officials were allowed to wear the badges of their husbands or substituted them with a bird of the equivalent rank from the ranks of the civil officials since military badges were considered inappropriate for women. But if this is true, how then do we explain these “misdirected” badges? Courtesy of Judith Rutherford, gifted in 2001 to the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

## STAFF

A staff or cane identifies the bearer as being someone worthy of respect. It is “a symbol of the dignity of and reverence for old age.”<sup>62</sup> According to Chinese tradition, people were first permitted to use a cane in their own villages at the age of sixty, beyond their village walls at age seventy, and at eighty could appear before the emperor without having to kneel.

Staffs can also be used to defeat enemies and obtain owners whatever catches their owners’ eye. The most famous example of such a staff is that carried by Sūn Wūkōng (see Figs. [303](#), [307](#), and [536](#)).

## SUN

The sun is one of the oldest symbols in Chinese art. The sun motif appeared on textiles quite early, with the “mythical motif of a bird carrying the sun or a bird settling on the sun ... already quite developed.”<sup>63</sup> These sun-carrying birds lived on the *fusang* (扶桑) tree, a legendary mulberry tree located in the east, from which the sun was supposed to rise. Because the Chinese believed that ten days constituted a cycle, these trees are often depicted with ten suns or ten ravens representing the suns. Each day one bird took off, its circular flight representing the passage of one day. It was when the ten suns, tired of taking turns, took to the sky all at once and nearly destroyed the world with their heat, that Hòu Yì, the Archer (see p. 164), was called on to bring them down. In the end, he shot down nine, leaving only one sun.

Other ancient depictions of the sun include a circle with either one or more small curving strokes in it that scholars have identified as *wōyún* (润云, a vortical “whirling cloud motif”<sup>64</sup> (Figs. 609, 610). If this is true, the design looks suspiciously like a prototype *yīn/yáng* circle, making one wonder if the Chinese in watching the moon did not recognize the same repetitive, cyclical pattern they saw in the sun, eventually enlarging the one vortex into two to represent the sun and the moon, and thus creating the *yīn/yáng* symbol. The eight-pointed star, a motif that can be found on both ancient bronzes and textiles, is also believed to be a symbol for the sun dating back at least to the Han (206 BCE-CE 220).

The sun, moon, and stars represent the Three Lights (*sānchén* 三辰) according to a Song Dynasty text, the *Shàngshū Xiángjiǎ* (尚书祥角军), “symbolising the superior power of illumination.”<sup>65</sup> They were amongst the twelve items known collectively as the Twelve Imperial Symbols (see TWELVE p. 231) found on the emperor’s robes, identifying him as the Son of Heaven (*tiānzǐ* 天子), the link between heaven and earth. During the Ming Dynasty, the sun was represented by a disk on the emperor’s left shoulder, the moon by a disk on his right shoulder. The constellation of seven stars (representing the Big Dipper) appeared above the mountain located above the main central dragon on the back. Later, during the Qing Dynasty, the constellations were represented by only three stars and moved into a position over the main dragon on the chest of the gown (see Fig. 525).

Textile experts are still debating why a sun was added to the rank badges (“mandarin squares”) of court officials’ garments during the Qing.<sup>66</sup> Some believe that it is a symbol of the emperor himself. Others believe it is a reference

to a Chinese proverb, “Aim at the sun and rise high.”<sup>67</sup> Since the sun was always supposed to be located on the wearer’s chest on the side closest to the emperor, we know that it usually appears on the right-hand side of civil servants’ badges, which carry bird motifs, and on the left-hand side of military badges, which bear animal motifs, as civil servants stood on the emperor’s left and military officers on his right. If you spot a rank badge with the sun on the wrong side, you are probably viewing a rank badge worn by the wife of a civil servant. From the Qing Dynasty on, wives were allowed to wear rank badges equivalent to those of their husbands, but as a mirror image, so that when a husband and wife were seen together, the two figures would gaze upon one another in a harmonious pattern and form a “whole” – in the case of a husband and wife, a united pair (Fig. [611](#)). “Confronting” birds and animals is one of the oldest patterns found on Chinese textiles.

If anyone, man or beast, is pointing (*zhǐ* 指) at the sun (*rì* 日) in a picture, add the meaning “imminently expected,” as *zhǐrì* is a shortened form of *zhǐrìkědài* (指日可待), meaning “imminently expected” or, more colloquially, “just around the corner.” Such a scene is also shorthand for *zhǐrì gāoshēng* (指日高升), “getting rich through getting a promotion” (*gāoshēng*).<sup>68</sup>

A sun rising above ocean waves represents justice to the Chinese and was a popular motif not only in paintings that once hung in courts of law, but also on such objects as the snuff bottles owned and collected by the literati class.<sup>69</sup> These scenes are sometimes accompanied by the inscription 明镜高悬 (*míngjìng gāoxuán*), which literally translates as “the totally reflecting mirror hung on high,” an expression used to refer to an official’s ability to judge a case fairly. An alternative text was 秦镜高悬 (*Qínjìng gāoxuán*), “the Qín mirror hung on high,” which refers back to a mirror 4 feet by 5 feet 9 inches in size, supposedly owned by the founder of the Qín Dynasty (Qín Shǐ huángdì 秦始皇帝), that would reflect the true nature of a person.

If there is a bat in the picture of an ocean with a sun, then the ocean is understood to represent the Eastern Sea and the bat “happiness” in a pictorial representation of one of the lines from a famous Chinese couplet, 福如东海 (*fú rú dōng hǎi*), “Happiness as vast as the Eastern Sea.” See also BAT p. [112](#).

## SWASTIKA



The swastika is an ancient Chinese pattern that was also known in India, where it was associated with Buddhism. Scholars believe its Buddhist symbolism was introduced to China ca. 200 BCE.<sup>70</sup> It was the devoutly Buddhist but exceptionally ambitious Tang Dynasty Empress Wǔ Zetian (r. 685–705) who named the swastika *wàn* (万), meaning “10,000” or “countless, unlimited,” on one of her birthdays,<sup>71</sup> and ever since it has been used with other symbols and motifs to compound their meaning. A bat (*fú* 蝠) brandishing a swastika on a ribbon translates in its simplest form as “10,000 blessings” (*wànfú* 万福) (Fig. 615). A more complex expression, *wàn fú shòu xián* (万福寿衔), “infinite [blessings] of fortune, longevity, and promotions,” is the meaning of a picture of a bat (*fú* 蝠) carrying a swastika (*wàn* 万) in its mouth (*xián* 衔), either on a ribbon (*shòudài* 绶带) or with the swastika trailing ribbons. Note that *xián* (衔) has a secondary meaning of “rank, title.”



Fig. 612 The beams of this house in Yunnan are decorated with swastikas and flowers. The character *shòu* can just be made out on the roof tiles.



Fig. 613 A familiar swastika (*wàn*) design meaning “10,000” or “without limit” is found on the modern carpeting of the Grand Hyatt Hotel, Beijing.



Fig. 614 A Beijing drain grating incorporating and modernizing the familiar swastika or *wàn* pattern.



Fig. 615 A door in the Forbidden City, Beijing, with motifs of bats carrying the character *shòu* from their mouths which are trailing ribbons. The addition of the ribbons (*dài*) adds the concept of “generations” (*dài*) to the felicitation “May you live a long life full of happiness.” The swastikas add the concept of “everlasting.” Hence, the center door wishes the building’s inhabitants (the imperial family) “generations of everlasting happiness and longevity.” The combination of two swastikas with a *shòu* character reads *wàn wàn shòu* or “May you live for 10,000 years,” a popular birthday greeting and expression.



Fig. 616 A butterfly and flower symbolize happiness together, but the addition of the tiny swastika sign on the butterfly’s face adds the concept of “everlasting.” Detail from an embroidered earwarmer.

The bat and swastika motif is common on textiles, but also appears in seed pearls and blue enamel on hair ornaments once worn by Qing Dynasty (1644–

1911) consorts accompanying the character *shòu* or “longevity” and other symbols (Fig. [616](#)). In paintings and textiles, you will sometimes discover hidden swastikas, for example, the unique way clouds were depicted on Kāngxī Period rank badges – “larger cloud masses ... [having] a distinctive tapering tendril on both the top and bottom (pointing in opposite directions), forming an incomplete swastika with the horizontal component of the mass.”<sup>72</sup>

The most common design employing swastikas is the combination of two swastikas with the *shòu* character (*wàn wàn shòu* 万万寿), “May you live for 10,000 years,” a common birthday wish, and especially appropriate for an emperor. It was a very popular motif during the reign of the Emperor Qiánlóng in recognition of his long reign.

The swastika is also a common knot pattern (see KNOTS p. [254](#)).

## SWORDS

A man carrying a sword on his back and a fly whisk in his hands is the popular figure Lǚ Dòngbīn (呂洞賓), one of the most familiar of the Eight Immortals (see p. [179](#)). A sword tied by ribbons to seven other objects identifies the grouping known as the EIGHT DAOIST SYMBOLS (see p. [240](#)).

## TEAPOTS

Teapots (*hú* 壺) are said to represent fertility, ostensibly because of the manner in which the spout dips into the waiting cup, but they also have a homophonous relationship with a *hù* that means “protect, shield, guard” (护) and a *hù* that means “blessing” (祐) (Figs. [565](#), [617-619](#)). As a result, from the Qing Dynasty onwards, tiny little teapots can be found as charms accompanying other fertility and auspicious charms on such objects as women’s personal grooming kits and talisman chains.<sup>73</sup> Teapots in the shape of auspicious fruits or vegetables were also popular, conveying the message to the lucky drinkers of tea from that pot, “May you have the blessing of longevity” (peach shapes), “fertility” (pumpkin shapes), etc.

## TRIPOD VESSELS

Nine tripod vessels (*dǐng* 鼎) shown together symbolize legitimacy of rule or supreme imperial power (Fig. [620](#)). According to the *Zuǒzhuàn* (左傳), a classic Chinese commentary on the “Spring and Autumn Annals,” the legendary sage king Yǔ “the Great” or Dà Yǔ 大禹, had nine bronze vessels made of the metal he received from the nine provinces of his kingdom.<sup>74</sup> The vessels were said to be able to teach “people to distinguish between faithfulness and treachery, and to keep evils and demons from harming people,”<sup>75</sup> hence their importance. References vary, however, as to their decoration. The *Zuǒzhuàn* says they were decorated with all the objects that exist in nature, whereas the *Shǐjì* (九鼎, *Records of the Grand Historian of China*) says they were decorated with maps of the nine provinces plus population and property statistics. Today, nine tripods (*jiǔ dǐng* 九鼎) still “express the lucky meaning of wishing the whole country peaceful and tranquil [sic]”<sup>76</sup> as they are a rebus for “forever” (*jiǔ* 久) “calm, stable” (*dìng* 定). The Chinese expression is *jiǔ dǐng xiánníng* (九鼎咸宁). *Xiánníng* (咸宁) means “all peaceful.”

The depiction of nine tripods was a popular snuff bottle design and is sometimes understood as representing the pattern known as 100 Antiques (see LARGE NUMBERS p. [231](#)).

Bronze (which is an alloy of copper and tin) in ancient China was always a symbol of wealth and power. Most ancient bronzes were ritual vessels, weapons, or musical instruments reserved for use at official or significant occasions.



Fig. 617 China’s love of unspoken felicitations and blessings makes some of its most charming statements through its teapots. This teapot, for example, in the shape of a lotus seedpod with a frog atop it, wishes its users many descendants.



Fig. 618 Another teapot with another frog seated atop a lily pad.



Fig. 619 A teapot in the shape of a peach for “longevity,” with a bat for “good fortune.” The vine adds the concept of “everlasting.”



Fig. 620 A bronze tripod vessel in the Temple of the Soul's Retreat (Língyǐnshì), Hangzhou.





Fig. 621 Vases have a homophone that means “peace” in Chinese, which is understood to stand in conjunction with the felicitation of the pattern on them, in this case peaches and other fruit and flowers. Vines add the concept of “everlasting,” forming an overall auspicious wish for “everlasting peace and prosperity.” Courtesy of Kwan Hua Art Gallery, Singapore.



Fig. 622 An elephant with a jar or vase (*qíxiàng*) on its back, or a vase decorated with an elephant (“vase with elephant”) symbolizes “peace and serenity” because a vase (*píng*) is a homophone for “peace,” and *qíxiàng* is a cipher for *jíxiáng* (“happy and auspicious”). Drawing courtesy of Sonja Bjaaland.

## VASES

The Chinese word for vase (as well as bottle) is *píng* (瓶), which has a homophone meaning “peace or peaceful” (*píng* 平) (Fig. 621). The gift of a vase or snuff bottle is therefore, to the Chinese, a perfect present as it wishes the recipient “peace” even before moving on to the next level of symbolism – the design on the vase or snuff bottle itself, as demonstrated in these four examples: (1) A vase (*píng*) decorated with a *rúyì* border pattern should be interpreted as “May you have peace with your wishes fulfilled,” since a *rúyì* is a ceremonial scepter (p. 258) that is a pun that can be read “according to your wishes.” (2) A vase covered in a swastika (*wàn*) design should be understood as expressing the desire for “10,000 (*wàn*) [everlasting] years of peace (*píng*).” (3) A vase holding four different seasonal flowers (see p. 21) represents the meaning “peace throughout the year.” It has also been said that a vase can symbolize “offerings made to deities in a Buddhist context. The flowers in the vase represent virtues.”<sup>77</sup> (4) A snuff bottle depicting the sun, moon, pairs of triple stars (representing constellations), and a *yīn* / *yáng* symbol on rolling waves, together with the bottle (*píng*) itself, is a rebus for global peace, for example, “peace throughout the heavens and on earth.”

Each of a pair of hairpins in the Beijing Palace Museum’s jewelry collection, formerly intended for imperial concubines and consorts of the Qing Dynasty,

consists of a vase holding three peacock feathers and *rúyì* clusters,<sup>78</sup> probably expressing the wish for the peace achieved by having as many princely sons (symbolized by the three peacock feathers as only princes were allowed to wear three feathers), as desired (the *rúyì* scepter).

Another very popular combination is that of a vase or pair of vases together with either a mirror (*jìng* 镜) or a stone chime (*qìng* 磬), both homophones for the expression meaning “calm” (*píngqíng* 平情). This is a textile motif as well as a popular household grouping, for example, a pair of vases with a mirror is a common grouping found on side tables in Chinese homes.

For the interpretation of an elephant carrying a vase on its back (Fig. [622](#)), which expresses the sentiment of “peace and serenity,” see ELEPHANT p. [128](#).

## WINE VESSELS

These generally symbolize filial piety though they may be used to convey other auspicious wishes. Wine bottled on the day a son was born, hopefully to be opened on the day he passed his examinations, was known as *zhuàngyuánhóng* (状元红), *zhuàngyuán* denoting the top-placed scholar in those all-important career-making imperial examinations in feudal China.<sup>79</sup> There are also porcelain snuff bottles in the shape of a classic wine jar bearing the characters *zhuàngyuánhóng* (状元红),<sup>80</sup> another rebus of encouragement or congratulations for passing the examinations. The term is still used in China today to designate a top performer in any area. Wine bottled for a baby girl, to be drunk on her wedding day, was known as *nǚérhóng* (女儿红).

## WRITING INSTRUMENTS

Calligraphy brushes (*bǐ* 笔) and other writing instruments signal scholarly pursuits and achievements. A common grouping is the Four Treasures of the Literary Study: ink, paper, brush, and inkstone. (Fig. [623](#)). Ink came, and still does, in hard sticks in China, to be ground with water on an inkstone. Inkstones have a small well to hold water, plus a larger, flat area where the inkstone is rubbed. Water is slowly brought up into the rubbing area with a brush until the ink is the right consistency and color.

If the inkstone is in the shape of an ingot ( *dìng* 錠), you have the makings of a common rebus. A calligraphy brush with an ingot ( *dìngzi* 錠子) amplifies the “surely” meaning found in the brush, as there is another *dìng* ( 定) that means “surely, must, will certainly.” If there is a *rúyì* scepter in the picture, the motif is known as “brush, ingot, and scepter” ( *bǐ dìng rúyì* 笔锭如意), which, by substituting homophones for the first two characters, becomes *bì dìng rúyì* ( 必定如意), “surely everything will be as you wish.”

A calligraphy brush ( *bǐ* 笔) through the center ( *zhōng* 中) of a wheel or coin is a proxy for the expression “certainly you will succeed,” as the *bǐ* of “brush” ( 笔) is a homophone for the *bì* that means “surely” ( 必) and the *zhōng* of “center, middle” ( 中) is a homophone for the *zhòng* that means “to hit the mark, succeed” ( 中).

A calligraphy brush in the hand of a small boy has the same symbolism, indicating the certainty of something, for example, the calligraphy brush in the hand of Kuíxīng, the God of Examinations (see p. [161](#)), ensuring examination success.



Fig. 623 On top of the desk are three of the Four Treasures of the Scholar's Studio (*wénfáng sìbǎo*): a writing brush, a slender ink stick, and a carved ink slab. Together with paper, they compromise the necessary instruments for calligraphic writing. Courtesy of Ronald G. Knapp.



## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Ichisada Miyazaki (trans. Conrad Schirokauer), *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1976, p. [88](#).
- <sup>2</sup> C. A. S. Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, 3rd edn, New York: Dover Publications, 1976, p. [31](#).
- <sup>3</sup> Many different types of ancient bells existed. Two of the most common were *náo* (铙), inverted, tongueless bells sometimes described as percussion instruments as they were played by being hit with hammers, and *bó* (搏), sets of large bells used at ceremonies and banquets.
- <sup>4</sup> Margaret Duda, *Four Centuries of Silver: Personal Adornment in the Qing Dynasty and After*, Singapore: Times Editions, 2002, p. [83](#).
- <sup>5</sup> Schuyler Cammann, *China's Dragon Robes*, New York: Ronald Press, 1952, p. [103](#).
- <sup>6</sup> Although originally made of silver, most decorative bells today are made of an alloy of white copper and nickel known in Chinese as *báitóng* (白铜).
- <sup>7</sup> Scott Minick and Jiao Ping, *Arts and Crafts of China*, Singapore: Thames & Hudson, 1996, p. [25](#).
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, illustration p. [102](#).
- <sup>9</sup> Duda, *Four Centuries of Silver*, p. [83](#).
- <sup>10</sup> Lǚ Bān (鲁班) was believed to have lived in the State of Chu during the transition period between the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BCE) and the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE).
- <sup>11</sup> John Man, *Genghis Khan: Life, Death and Resurrection*, London: Bantam Press, 2005, p. [85](#).
- <sup>12</sup> See, for example, Bernhard Karlgren, "Some Fecundity Symbols in Ancient China," Bulletin No. 2, Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1930.
- <sup>13</sup> Fang Jing Pei, *Symbols and Rebuses in Chinese Art: Figures, Bugs, Beasts and Flowers*, Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 2004, p. [28](#). Karlgren, "Some Fecundity Symbols in Ancient China," quotes from a Chinese text: "When a child is born, if it is a son, one puts up a bow to the left of the door; if it is a girl, one puts up a handkerchief to the right of the door. If it is a son, there is shooting, if it is a girl, there is not."
- <sup>14</sup> R. H. Mathews, *A Chinese-English Dictionary Compiled for the China Inland Mission*, revised American edition, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979, p. 431. One way of representing this in art could have been a picture of day lilies in the early morning together with a butterfly. Day lilies (*xuāncǎo* 萱草) give us both a homophone *xuán* (悬), "hang or suspend," and a homophone for *cǎo* (zǎo 早), "early morning," a synonym for "dawn" (*dàn* 旦). "Butterfly" (*hú* 網) is a homophone for an ancient word for a bow (*hú* 弧). Hence, day lilies and a butterfly in the early morning could depict the congratulatory phrase once used on a man's birthday, *xuánhú língdàn* (悬弧令旦). I confess, however, to be still looking for this combination in an extant piece of Chinese art and my belief that this combination exists could just be a case of an overactive imagination.
- <sup>15</sup> W. Perceval Yetts, "Symbolism in Chinese Art," lecture delivered at the China Society, London, January



- 18, 1912, Singapore: Cybille Orient Gallery, 1984, p. [11](#).
- [16](#) Beverley Jackson and David Hugus, *Ladder to the Clouds: Intrigue and Tradition in Chinese Rank*, Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 1999, p. [221](#).
- [17](#) Jessica Rawson, *Chinese Ornament: The Lotus and the Dragon*, London: British Museum Publications, 1984, p. [142](#).
- [18](#) They were first found in the Liangzhu culture of China (ca. 3300–2200 BCE).
- [19](#) Rawson, *Chinese Ornament*, p. [66](#).
- [20](#) According to the *Sòng Shū* (宋书), the history of the period known as the Liu Song Period (420–79). Another explanation for why clouds were depicted in so many colors on Chinese textiles and art is credited to the story of how the mythical First Ancestress (Nǚ wā) once patched up the broken heavens with colorful stones.
- [21](#) It now appears that despite the supposed symbolism of the square hole representing “earth,” the shift from a round to a square hole was most likely to facilitate the manufacturing process. “The central hole always found on Chinese cash coins served a dual function. Of course, this facilitated stringing. The other aspect concerned the manufacturing process. Coins were cast in the form of ‘trees,’ from which the individual pieces would be broken off by mint workers. This left jagged protrusions from their edges; to smooth the coins, a batch at a time, they would be stacked with a square bar through their holes, to hold them in place while a file was applied to their rough edges. That is why the round hole on the earliest coins was soon supplanted by the square-hole format.” <http://apps.heritagecoin.com/features/numisarticles.php?id=97>
- [22](#) Raymond Li, in *A Glossary of Chinese Snuff Bottle Rebus: Re-discovering the Hidden Internal Beauty in Snuff Bottles*, Hong Kong: Nine Dragons, 1976, p. [13](#), describes a snuff bottle in his collection that depicts Liú Hǎi with his toad and coins that bore the inscription *yīpǐn dàngcháo* (一品当朝), “top rank in the current dynasty,” where the coins have the same double meaning described above.
- [23](#) Lien-sheng Yang, *Money and Credit in China: A Short History*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 12, 1952. “In the 123 years after 188 BCE, when *wuzhu* [round coins with square holes] coins first came into use, more than twenty-eight billion coins were cast.” In the Mawangdui Tomb 1, the imitation coins, of which there were more than forty containers, each containing 2,500–3,000 coins, were referred to on the tomb inventory records as “dirt cash” (*tǔqián* 土钱). <http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/shandong/8.html>
- [24](#) Changzhou is located midway between Shanghai and Nanjing, 93 miles (150 km) northwest of Shanghai. The museum’s address is 常州市博物馆, Qingliang Lu, Changzhou, Jiangsu, China.
- [25](#) Ana Maria Amaro, “The Wonderful World of Chinese Fans,” <http://www.lorient.com/erm2000june.html>.
- [26](#) Yang Xianrang and Yang Yang, *Chinese Folk Art*, Beijing: New World Press, 2000, p. [225](#).
- [27](#) Raymond Li, *A Glossary of Chinese Snuff Bottle Rebus*, p. [24](#).
- [28](#) Edouard Chavannes (trans. and illus. Elaine Spaulding Atwood), *The Five Happinesses: Symbolism in Chinese Popular Art*, New York: Weatherhill, 1973, p. [19](#), describes an amulet with this trio of articles in the Musée Guimet in Paris.

- [29](#) Cammann, *China's Dragon Robes*, p. [105](#).
- [30](#) Teresa Tse Bartholomew, *Myths and Rebuses in Chinese Art*, exhibition catalogue, California: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1988.
- [31](#) See, for example, John E. Vollmer, *Five Colours of the Universe: Symbolism in Clothes and Fabrics of the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644–1911)*, exhibition catalogue, Edmonton, Alberta: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1980, p. [70](#).
- [32](#) Art Institute of Chicago, *Dressed to Rule the Universe: Ming and Qing Dynasty Textiles at the Art Institute of Chicago*, Chicago, Illinois: The Art Institute of Chicago in association with University of Washington Press, 2000, pp. [62–3](#).
- [33](#) Cammann, *China's Dragon Robes*, p. [106](#).
- [34](#) <http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~et3m-tkkw/history9.html>
- [35](#) An amusing list of some of the various knots that existed during the Qing Dynasty can be found in the Chinese classic, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Ch. 35.
- [36](#) Lydia Chen, *Chinese Knotting*, Taipei: Echo Publishing, 1981, pp. [12–13](#).
- [37](#) Li Zuding (chief ed.), *Chinese Traditional Auspicious Patterns*, PRC: Shanghai Popular Science Press, 1989, p. [55](#).
- [38](#) Florence Ayscough, *A Chinese Mirror: Being Reflections of the Reality behind Appearance*. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1925, p. 9.
- [39](#) It is sometimes difficult to see how the dark metal objects we see identified as “ancient Chinese mirrors” in today’s museums could have functioned as such, but one has to remember that they were originally shiny and bright; they have attained their green patina through age. Students of Chinese will find it helpful to remember that the character’s radical means “metal” (*jīn* 金).
- [40](#) The Shanghai Museum has a very nice square mirror from the Liao Dynasty (907–1125), as well as some lotus-and octafoil-shaped ones. During the Tang, mirrors were often square in shape, although many were, indeed, round.
- [41](#) Rawson, *Chinese Ornament*, p. [91](#).
- [42](#) Ayscough, *A Chinese Mirror*, p. 9 quoting from the twelfth-century catalogue of antique bronzes known as the *Bógǔ túlù* (博古图录).
- [43](#) See, for example, Sotheby’s, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, auction catalogue, New York, March 23, 2004, item #118. This lot included a circular mirror bearing the inscription *wǔ yuè wǔ rì wǔ shí* (五月五日五时), “the fifth period of the fifth day of the fifth month.” For more on the fifth day of the fifth month, see centipede p. [93](#), lizard p. [102](#), scorpion p. [102](#), toad p. [104](#), and viper p. [106](#).
- [44](#) T. C. Lai (ed.), *Things Chinese*, Hong Kong: Swindon Book Company, 1971, p. [187](#).
- [45](#) Cammann, *China's Dragon Robes*, p. [94](#).
- [46](#) Derk Bodde (trans.), *Annual Customs and Festivals in Peking as Recorded in the Yenching Sui-shih-chi by Tun Li-Ch'en*, 2nd edn, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1987, p. [64](#).
- [47](#) The *Book of Rites* (*Lǐjì*, 礼记), Book XX, “The Law of Sacrifices,” referred to in Stanley Charles Nott,

*Chinese Jade Throughout the Ages: A Review of Its Characteristics, Decoration, Folklore and Symbolism*, London: B. T. Batsford, 1936, p. [31](#).

- [48](#) Werner Speiser, *Art of China: Spirit and Society*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1966, p. [112](#).
- [49](#) Wolfram Eberhard (trans. G. L. Campbell), *Times Dictionary of Chinese Symbols: An Essential Guide to the Hidden Symbols in Chinese Art, Customs and Beliefs*, Singapore: Federal Publications, 1990, p. [194](#).
- [50](#) These stripes are curved and undulating in the early Qing, but become straight in the late Qing and increase in height to “approximately one third of the total length of the robe.” See Chu Sui Mui and Jorge Costa Oliveira, *Antique Chinese Clothing: A Catalogue of the Private Collection [sic] of Chu Sui Mui and Jorge Costa Oliveira at the Clube Militar de Macau 20.10.1995– 05.11.1995*, Macau, 1995, p. [25](#).
- [51](#) John R. Finlay, “Qianlong Imperial Jades in the Norton Museum of Art,” *The Chinese Collection: Selected Works from the Norton Museum of Art*, West Palm Beach, 2003, p. [62](#).
- [52](#) The word for “child” is *háizi*, and that for “precious” *guì*, and because children are regarded as so precious, collectively they form the term *guìzi*.
- [53](#) Roberta Helmer Stalberg and Ruth Nesi, *China’s Crafts: The Story of How They’re Made and What They Mean*, New York: Eurasia Press, 1980, p. [49](#).
- [54](#) Which can be seen today in the Newark Museum, New Jersey.
- [55](#) Iris Barrel Apfel, *Dragon Threads: Court Costumes of the Celestial Kingdom. Chinese Textiles from the Iris Barrel Apfel and ATTATA Foundation Collections*, Newark, New Jersey: Newark Museum, 1992, p. [11](#).
- [56](#) Bartholomew, *Myths and Rebuses in Chinese Art*, p. [11](#).
- [57](#) The Palace Museum (ed.), *Jewelry and Accessories of the Royal Consorts of Ch’ing Dynasty*, Beijing: Forbidden City Publishing House, 1992, p. [81](#).
- [58](#) For some wonderful pictures of the vast array of designs on such locks, see Duda, *Four Centuries of Silver*.
- [59](#) See, for example, this proposed in Sotheby’s, *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, lot #45, p. [28](#).
- [60](#) See, for example, Nott, *Chinese Jade*, pp. [63](#) ff.
- [61](#) Schuyler Cammann, *Substance and Symbol in Chinese Toggles: Chinese Belt Toggles from the C. F. Bieber Collection*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962, p. [138](#). In Cantonese, shoes are called *hai* or *haizi* or *haizai*; in Hakka, they are *hai*.
- [62](#) Lee Siow Mong, *Spectrum of Chinese Culture*, Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 1986, p. [16](#).
- [63](#) Yang Lihui and An Deming, with Jessica Anderson Turner, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology, Handbooks of World Mythology*, Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2005, p. [33](#).
- [64](#) Zhao Feng, “Symbols of Power and Prestige: Sun, Moon, Dragon and Phoenix Motifs on Silk Textiles,” in Wong Hwei Lian and Szan Tan (eds.), *Power Dressing: Textiles for Rulers and Priests from the Chris Hall Collection*, exhibition catalogue, Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2006, p. [40](#).
- [65](#) *Ibid.*, p. [44](#).

- [66](#) They have proven to be very helpful, however, in dating Qing Dynasty badges as the way in which the sun was depicted (spiral, concentric rings) and the colors used varied from period to period. For an excellent discussion of this subject, see Jackson and Hugus, *Ladder to the Clouds*.
- [67](#) Ibid., pp. [139 ff](#), for a discussion of these two views.
- [68](#) Dr Ni Yibing, in a lecture held at the Southeast Asia Ceramic Society, Singapore, November 15, 2005.
- [69](#) See for example, Raymond Li, *A Glossary of Chinese Snuff Bottle Rebus*, p. [11](#).
- [70](#) Loretta H. Wang, *The Chinese Purse: Embroidered Purses of the Ch'ing Dynasty*, 2nd edn, Taipei, Taiwan: Hilit Publishing, 1991, p. [24](#).
- [71](#) 段建华, 中国吉祥装饰设计 [Duàn Jiàn huá, *Chinese Auspicious Decoration Design*], 北京: 中国轻工业出版社 [May 1, 1999], p. [56](#).
- [72](#) Jackson and Hugus, *Ladder to the Clouds*, p. [223](#).
- [73](#) See, for example, some examples in Duda, *Four Centuries of Silver*, p. [82](#).
- [74](#) This is the same Dà Yǔ (大禹) who stopped the great floods. See ox p. [139](#).
- [75](#) Yang and An, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology*, p. [240](#).
- [76](#) 段建华, 中国吉祥装饰设计, p. [59](#).
- [77](#) Wong Hwei Lian and Sze Tan (eds.), *Power Dressing: Textiles for Rulers and Priests from the Chris Hall Collection*, exhibition catalogue, Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2006, p. 417.
- [78](#) The Palace Museum, *Jewelry and Accessories of the Royal Consorts of Ch'ing Dynasty*, p. [78](#).
- [79](#) The final *hóng* (红) means “red” as in “red wine.”
- [80](#) Raymond Li, *A Glossary of Chinese Snuff Bottle Rebus*, p. [36](#).

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# WHERE TO SEE CHINESE ART

## ENGLAND

### **Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford**

Beaumont Street (opposite the Randolph Hotel)  
Oxford, UK OX1 2PH  
[www.ashmolean.org](http://www.ashmolean.org)

The collections at the Ashmolean as a whole outstrip those of any other university museum, and in the UK are surpassed only by those of the British Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum. Mention should be made of its unique collection of early Chinese ceramics and seals in addition to a growing collection of contemporary Chinese painting (a field which few other museums in Europe have entered).

### **British Museum**

Great Russell Street  
London, UK WC1B 3DG  
[www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)  
[www.ancientchina.co.uk](http://www.ancientchina.co.uk)

One of the world's greatest museums, the British Museum has an extensive China collection of antiquities, paintings, and porcelain ranging from the Neolithic period to modern paintings and prints. The published volumes on its porcelain collection are among the finest in the world. The museum is also famous for its collection of Chinese Buddhist paintings from Dunhuang, Central Asia.

### **School of Oriental and Asian Studies (SOAS)**

The Brunei Gallery, SOAS, University of London  
Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square  
London, UK WC1H 0XG

[www.soas.ac.uk/gallery/home.html](http://www.soas.ac.uk/gallery/home.html)

The Brunei Gallery is dedicated to showing work of and from Asia and Africa, of both an historical and contemporary nature. The gallery holds changing exhibitions on a regular basis, so museum goers are advised to keep abreast of its schedule.

### **Sir Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art (SOAS)**

53 Gordon Square  
London, UK WC1H 0PD

[www.pdfmuseum.org.uk](http://www.pdfmuseum.org.uk)

One of the world's finest collections of Chinese ceramics is housed in this boutique museum in central London. The Foundation exists to promote the study and teaching of Chinese art and culture. In recent years, it has considerably expanded its range of activities and has made its collection, which was already famous among scholars and connoisseurs of Chinese art, known to a wider audience. The website allows visitors to explore the Foundation and gives a wonderful glimpse of the collection itself.

### **Victoria & Albert Museum**

Cromwell Road  
London, UK SW7 2RL

[www.vam.ac.uk](http://www.vam.ac.uk)

The T. T. Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art at the V&A houses an incomparable treasury of Chinese bronzes, ceramics, jades, lacquer, furniture, cloisonné enamels, ivory, wood, bamboo, paintings, and

textiles. In many areas, such as furniture and textiles, the V&A holdings are among the best study resources outside of China. The museum holds many special exhibits.

## FRANCE

### **Musée Cernuschi**

7, avenue Velasquez

75008 Paris, France

[www.cernuschi.paris.fr](http://www.cernuschi.paris.fr)

This museum houses an eclectic range of early Chinese art collected by Enrico Cernuschi, an Italian forced to flee to Paris in 1850. In 1871, he set off on a world tour, passionately collecting Chinese art along the way. The museum's best collections are its very extensive bronzes and tomb figurines, primarily from the Han Dynasty. The museum is housed in a renovated nineteenth-century mansion and is definitely worth a visit.

### **Musée Guimet**

(Musée national des Arts asiatiques-Guimet)

6, place d'Iéna

75116 Paris, France

[www.museeguemet.fr](http://www.museeguemet.fr)

The Musée Guimet contains one of Europe's foremost Asian collections. The Chinese Department includes some 20,000 objects covering seven millennia of Chinese art, from the earliest times up to the eighteenth century, including jades, 10,000 ceramic pieces, sculpture, furniture, bronzes, and paintings. Good virtual tours are available on its website.

### **Musée du Quai Branly**

37, quai Branly  
75007 Paris, France  
[www.quaibranly.fr](http://www.quaibranly.fr)

This new branch of the Louvre, opened in the summer of 2006, incorporates art from some of Paris's other great collections, such as the Museum of Man, and is dedicated to the arts of Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Oceania.

## SWITZERLAND

### **Baur Collection**

Museum of Far Eastern Art  
8 rue Munier-Romilly  
Geneva-CH 1206, Switzerland  
[www.collections-baur.ch](http://www.collections-baur.ch)

The Alfred Baur collection of Chinese porcelains, jades, and Japanese art, is recognized as one of the most important collections of its kind in Europe. This charming boutique museum has notable Qing Dynasty porcelains, including a series of monochrome Chinese porcelains of the Kangxi Period, particularly "peach bloom" vases.

## CHINA

**Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art &  
Archaeology at Peking University, Beijing**  
Peking University  
Beijing, People's Republic of China

### **Capital Museum**

Fuxingmenwai Dajie, the western extension of Beijing's Chang'an Avenue

(located near the Muxidi subway station exit on Line 1,  
which runs under Chang'an Avenue)  
Beijing, People's Republic of China  
[www.capitalmuseum.org.cn](http://www.capitalmuseum.org.cn)

This five-story museum, long overdue in artifact-rich Beijing, opened in May 2006, and is a repository of the city's cultural wonders. Featuring an enormous central lobby and solar paneling, the museum houses three permanent plus rotating displays. The permanent galleries cover Beijing's history, urban development, and folk customs, while the rotating displays feature calligraphy, paintings, bronzes, jades, and ceramics.

### **Chinese Silk Museum**

Northern Ridge, Yuhuang Shan  
Hangzhou City, Zhejiang Province,  
People's Republic of China  
[www.chinasilkmuseum.com](http://www.chinasilkmuseum.com)

China's first national museum to specialize in silk and textiles, its collections cover over 5,000 years of silk development in China displayed in eight exhibition halls: Prelude Hall, Relics Hall, Folk Custom Hall, Silkworm Hall, Silk Manufacturing Hall, Weaving Hall, Dying Hall, and Achievements Hall.

### **Gugong Gongli Bowuyuan (The Palace Museum), Beijing**

Forbidden City  
Chang-an Avenue  
Beijing, People's Republic of China  
[www.dpm.org.cn](http://www.dpm.org.cn)

Historically and artistically, the Palace Museum is one of the most comprehensive museums in China. It was established on the



foundation of the palace that was the ritual center of the Ming and the Qing dynasties and their collections of treasures. The palace and museum were designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1987. The exhibition items on display tend to vary in quality but are gradually improving. The “digital palace museum” on the website is worth viewing.

### **Shanghai Art Museum**

325 Nanjing Xilu

Shanghai, People’s Republic of China

[www.cnarts.net/shanghaiart](http://www.cnarts.net/shanghaiart) (Chinese-language only)

Once a bustling 1930s horse racing hall, this magnificent historical structure was converted into a museum in 1950 to be refurbished and reopened in 1996 as a world-class museum. Today, it houses twelve different galleries covering 45,200 sq ft (4200 sq m), and showcases some of China’s most treasured artifacts. Audio guides in a variety of languages are available and are highly recommended.

## TAIWAN

### **National Palace Museum, Taipei**

221 Chih-shan Road, Sec. 2

Taipei, Taiwan, Republic of China

[www.npm.gov.tw](http://www.npm.gov.tw)

The National Palace Museum in Taipei houses treasures from the Forbidden City as well as other superb examples of Chinese classical art. The collection is so vast that only a small portion is on display at any one time. It has a digital image library with a good search function in English and excellent exhibitions.

## AUSTRALIA

## **Art Gallery of New South Wales**

Art Gallery Road, the Domain (next to the Botanic Gardens)

Sydney, Australia

[www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au)

[www.asianart.com.au](http://www.asianart.com.au)

The Asian collection is displayed in a new gallery built in 2003 and in a more traditional gallery directly below, with the Chinese collections covering 7,000 years of uninterrupted artistic evolution. Pottery tomb figures, imperial porcelains, Buddhist sculptures, and later paintings are particularly well represented. The displays are organized both to highlight the strengths of the collection and to reflect the forces and values that have shaped the arts of China. An excellent website allows you to browse virtually. This museum also attracts and hosts world-class exhibitions.

## **SINGAPORE**

### **Asian Civilisations Museum (Singapore)**

Empress Place (on the Singapore River)

Singapore

[www.nhb.gov.sg/ACM](http://www.nhb.gov.sg/ACM)

Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum has four main galleries, each focusing on one of the four main contributors to Singapore's cultural diversity: China, South Asia, the Islamic world, and Southeast Asia. Its Kwek Hong Png China gallery includes one of the top five Déhuà (*blanc-de-Chine*) ceramic collections in the world, the Hinckley Collection, as well as folk sculpture, religious statuary, textiles, imperial and export porcelain, and items from a scholar's study.

## **HONG KONG**

## **Hong Kong Museum of Art**

10 Salisbury Road

Tsimshatsui, Kowloon

Hong Kong SAR, PRC

[www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/Museum/ARTS/Index.htm](http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/Museum/ARTS/Index.htm)

Hong Kong's pre-eminent art museum has galleries focusing on Chinese antiquities, fine art, historical pictures, ceramics, seals, tea drinking, paintings, and calligraphy. The entire collection can be viewed online

## **JAPAN**

### **Tokyo National Museum**

Ueno Park

Tokyo, Japan

[www.tnm.go.jp/en](http://www.tnm.go.jp/en)

Japan's largest and oldest museum has a representative collection of Chinese art from the pre-Han to the Qing Dynasty, with some of its collection on-line for easy viewing and research. The museum hosts excellent traveling and special exhibitions.

## **NORTH AMERICA**

### **Art Institute of Chicago**

111 S. Michigan Avenue

Chicago, IL 60603-6110, USA

[www.artic.edu/aic](http://www.artic.edu/aic)

The Art Institute's Asian collection comprises works from China, Korea, Japan, India, Southwest Asia, the Near East, and the Middle East, spanning nearly five millennia. It has 35,000 objects of great

archaeological and artistic significance, including Chinese bronzes, ceramics, archaic jades, and textiles.

**Asian Art Museum of San Francisco**

200 Larkin Street

San Francisco, California, USA

[www.asianart.org](http://www.asianart.org)

This is one of the largest museums in the Western world devoted exclusively to Asian art. Its holdings include nearly 15,000 treasures spanning 6,000 years of history, representing cultures throughout Asia. Approximately 2,500 pieces are on show at any one time. The museum has a very strong collection of Buddhist art and an encyclopedic collection of Chinese ceramics and porcelain that provides a survey of the entire 4,500-year history of the art form in China, including representative samples from every time period and every major kiln throughout China. Ancient bronzes, textiles, sculpture, paintings, and other Chinese decorative arts round out the collection.

**Boston Museum of Fine Arts**

465 Huntington Avenue

Boston, Massachusetts, USA

[www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org)

This is one of the most comprehensive art museums in the world with over 400,000 works. Its superb collection of Asian art includes Chinese paintings, sculpture, and ceramics. The museum is in the process of cataloguing its collection on-line.

**Cleveland Museum of Art**

11150 East Boulevard

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

[www.clemusart.com](http://www.clemusart.com)

The permanent collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art includes more than 36,000 objects, including a specialized collection of Chinese art. Some 1,682 pieces from this collection can be viewed on-line, making it an invaluable site for those interested in Chinese art. The museum also holds special events and exhibitions.

### **Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery**

The Sackler Gallery is located at 1050

Independence Avenue, SW. The Freer

Gallery of Art is located at Jefferson Drive at 12th Street, SW.

The two museums are connected by an underground exhibition space.

Washington, DC, USA

[www.asia.si.edu](http://www.asia.si.edu)

These two galleries house a world-renowned collection of art from China, Japan, Korea, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, including Chinese paintings and Buddhist sculpture. The excellent website allows you to browse on-line.

### **Indianapolis Museum of Art**

4000 Michigan Road

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

[www.ima-art.org](http://www.ima-art.org)

The Indianapolis Museum of Art is among the largest general art museums in the US. One of its strengths is its collection of Chinese art. Among the many exquisite objects are works that are the finest of their kind in the world. The collection is broad in scope, including a wide variety of materials and spanning more than 6,000 years. Archaic bronzes and jades are represented, but the main collection focuses on ceramics. Of other interest is its Southern Song and early Yuan



paintings. The museum's new Asian art gallery opened in June 2006.

### **Minneapolis Institute of Art**

2400 Third Avenue

Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

[www.artsmia.org](http://www.artsmia.org)

The Minneapolis Institute of Art houses more than 100,000 objects from diverse cultural traditions, spanning 5,000 years of world history. The Asian collection has more than 9,500 objects representing seventeen cultures. There is an on-line search facility.

### **Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art**

4525 Oak Street

Kansas City, Missouri 64111-1873, USA

[www.nelson-atkins.org](http://www.nelson-atkins.org)

The Nelson-Atkins collection of Asian Art is just one of the museum's nine curatorial divisions, encompassing over a quarter of the museum's entire collection. Within this collection, its Chinese art collection is one of the largest and most diverse outside China. Its Buddhist sculptures from the fifth to tenth centuries and Chinese paintings are especially well-known. Although the collection features masterpieces from every phase of Chinese art, the Bronze Age is especially well represented in a series of ceremonial vessels and weapons.

### **Peabody Essex Museum**

East India Square

Salem, Massachusetts, USA

[www.pem.org](http://www.pem.org)

This museum houses one of the largest collections of Asian art on the

American east coast outside of New York. Started during the height of the China trade in Salem, the Chinese art collection is unique for its strength in vernacular art that explores the rich traditions of Chinese culture. It features important Qing Dynasty works, including ceramics, textiles, and decorative arts. It has good visiting exhibits, and a reconstructed Qing Dynasty merchant's house from Anhui Province in China is an added attraction.

### **Philadelphia Museum of Art**

26th Street and the Benjamin Franklin  
Parkway

Philadelphia, PA 19130, USA

[www.philamuseum.org](http://www.philamuseum.org)

This is one of the largest museums in the United States. Highlights of the Asian collection include paintings and sculpture from China, Japan, and India; furniture and decorative arts, including major collections of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean ceramics; and rare and authentic architectural assemblages, such as a Japanese teahouse, a Chinese palace hall, and a sixteenth-century Indian temple hall.

### **San Antonio Museum of Art**

200 West Jones Avenue

San Antonio, Texas, USA

[www.samuseum.org](http://www.samuseum.org)

The Lenora and Walter F. Brown Asian Art Wing is a 15,000 sq ft (1394 sq m) facility, making the San Antonio Museum of Art the largest center for Asian art in the southwestern United States. Its Asian art collections, which have been amassed over the past seventy years, have grown to prominence, and now include more than 1,400 works from China, India, Japan, Korea, Nepal, Pakistan, Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, and Tibet, spanning nearly 6,000 years of history.

### **San Diego Museum of Art**

1450 El Prado

Balboa Park

San Diego, California

[www.sdmart.org](http://www.sdmart.org)

The museum's China collection ranges from the Neolithic period to the twentieth century and includes jades, ceramics, bronzes, sculptures, carved lacquer, paintings, prints, calligraphy, and textiles. It has a digital library accessed at the above website.

### **Spencer Museum of Art**

1301 Mississippi St.

The University of Kansas

Lawrence, KS 66045-7500

[www2.ku.edu/~sma/](http://www2.ku.edu/~sma/)

The Helen Foresman Spencer Museum of Art is part of the University of Kansas. It has a small but interesting China collection that includes twentieth-century Chinese paintings and textiles (including court robes, rank badges, women's garments, sleeve bands, and other objects).

## **CANADA**

### **Royal Ontario Museum (ROM)**

100 Queen's Park

Toronto, Ontario M5S 2C6

Canada

[www.rom.on.ca/index.php](http://www.rom.on.ca/index.php)

This is one of the largest museums in North America and features four galleries of Chinese art: The Bishop White Gallery of Chinese Temple

Art, boasting three of the world's best-preserved temple wall paintings from the Yuan Dynasty and large wooden sculptures depicting bodhisattvas (buddhas-to-be); the Matthews Family Court of Chinese Sculpture; the Joey and Toby Tanenbaum Gallery of China; and the Royal Ontario Museum Gallery of Chinese Architecture.

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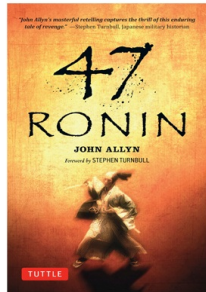
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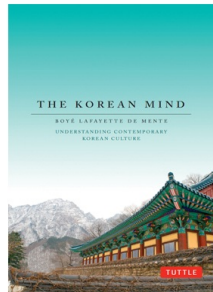
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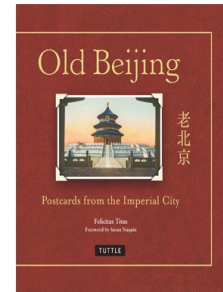
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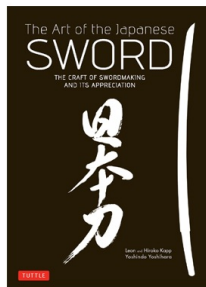
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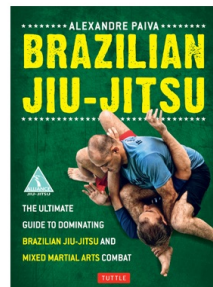
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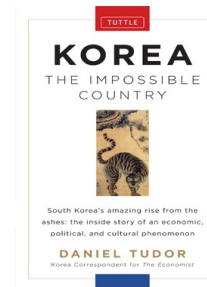
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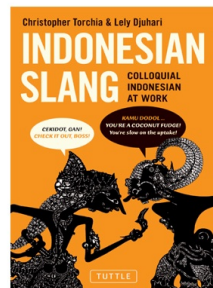
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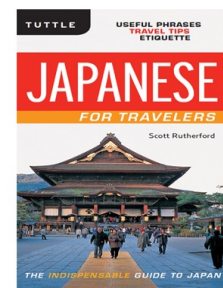
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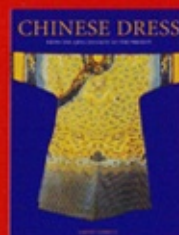




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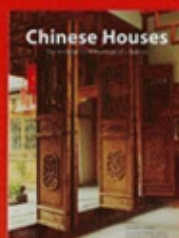
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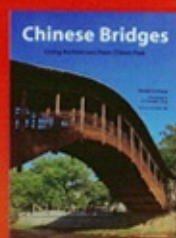
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